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Advertising Literacy. How Can Children and Adolescents Deal with Persuasive Messages in a Complex Media Environment?

Herausgegeben von Brigitte Naderer, Nils S. Borchers, Ruth Wendt und Thorsten Naab

Themenheft Nr. 43

Advertising Literacy

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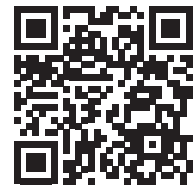


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Inhalt

Editorial: Advertising Literacy. How Can Children and Adolescents Deal with Persuasive Messages in a Complex Media Environment? Brigitte Naderer, Nils S. Borchers, Ruth Wendt, and Thorsten Naab	i
‘This might be advertising’. Perception, Understanding and Handling of Online Advertising by Children Claudia Lampert, Anne Schulze, and Stephan Dreyer	1
‘Alexa, Adv(ert)ise us!’. How Smart Speakers and Digital Assistants Challenge Advertising Literacy Amongst Young People Michael Haas and Anna Keller	19
The Visual Self. The Connection between Adolescents’ Self-Presentation on Instagram and Their Ability to Recognize and Evaluate Advertising Content Claudia Riesmeyer, Pauline Sawatzki, and Amelie Hagleitner	41
Brand Endorsers with Role Model Function. Social Media Influencers’ Self-Perception and Advertising Literacy Jessica Kühn and Claudia Riesmeyer	67
A Path Toward a More Understandable Advertising Disclosure for Children. Conceptualizing Determining Factors for Disclosure Effectiveness and Opportunities for Future Research Ines Spielvogel	97

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Editorial: Advertising Literacy

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

Brigitte Naderer , Nils S. Borchers , Ruth Wendt , and Thorsten Naab 

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.

We wish to thank the editors of *MedienPädagogik*, Klaus Rummler, Kai-Uwe Hugger, Stefan Iske, and Karsten D. Wolf, for making this special issue possible. We also want to thank the authors of this special issue as well as the reviewers whose

efforts have helped to increase the quality of the articles. Finally, since this special issue originates from a conference jointly organized by the Advertising Research Division and the Media Education Division of the German Communication Association (DGPK) at the University of Vienna in 2019, we wish to express our appreciation to everyone who helped to make this conference possible. In particular, we want to highlight that the organization team of the conference has received financial support from the Hochschuljubiläums Stiftung of the City of Vienna, which contributed to the success of the conference and to the emergence of this special issue.

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‘This might be advertising’

Perception, Understanding and Handling of Online Advertising by Children

Claudia Lampert , Anne Schulze, and Stephan Dreyer 

Abstract

Advertising is ubiquitous in children’s everyday life – and on the Internet. The manifestations of online advertising are not only diverse but also very dynamic, increasingly personalized and therefore challenging for young online users in multiple respects. The headline of this article directly addresses the problem, namely that the definition and operationalization of ‘online advertising’ in itself are crucial. From the perspectives of both a legislative view and media education, the central question arises whether children are able to identify online advertising as such and to understand its intention. A basic understanding of advertising and reliable labelling of advertising material is seen as fundamental requirements for children to identify advertising as such and to be able to handle it appropriately and competently. Concerning the question of advertising literacy, we present findings of an interdisciplinary study in which we investigate the concept of online advertising of primary school age and how they deal with advertising online. The results show how challenging online advertising is for children and at which points they have difficulties in transferring their concept of advertising to online content. Against the background of the study, we discuss the idea of advertising literacy and the methodological challenges about current and future forms of online advertising and persuasive messages.

«Das könnte Werbung sein». Wahrnehmung, Verständnis und Umgang mit Onlinewerbung durch Kinder

Zusammenfassung

Werbung ist im Alltag der Kinder allgegenwärtig – so auch im Internet. Die Erscheinungsformen der Online-Werbung sind nicht nur vielfältig, sondern auch sehr dynamisch, zunehmend personalisiert und entsprechend herausfordernd für junge Online-Nutzerinnen und -Nutzer. Mit der Überschrift dieses Aufsatzes ist unmittelbar die Problematik angesprochen, nämlich, dass bereits die Definition und Operationalisierung von «Onlinewerbung» ein kritisches Moment darstellt. Sowohl aus rechtlicher als auch aus medienpädagogischer Sicht stellt sich die Frage, ob Kinder in der Lage sind, Online-Werbung als solche zu erkennen und ihre Intention zu verstehen. Ein grundlegendes Verständnis von Werbung und eine zuverlässige Kennzeichnung von Werbemitteln werden als Grundvoraussetzung

dafür gesehen, dass Kinder Werbung als solche erkennen und angemessen und kompetent damit umgehen können. Im vorliegenden Beitrag stellen wir Ergebnisse einer interdisziplinären Studie vor, in der untersucht wurde, welches Werbeverständnis Kinder im Grundschulalter haben und wie sie Werbung im Internet begegnen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, wie herausfordernd Online-Werbung für Kinder ist und an welchen Stellen sie Schwierigkeiten haben, ihr Werbekonzept auf Online-Inhalte zu übertragen. Vor dem Hintergrund der Studie diskutieren wir das Konzept der Werbekompetenz sowie die methodischen Herausforderungen im Hinblick auf aktuelle und künftige Formen der Online-Werbung und persuasiver Kommunikation.

1. Introduction

Advertising is ubiquitous in children's everyday life – and on the Internet. Online advertising can take many forms, such as banners, insertions on websites, as well as brand placements in movies or games (Radesky et al. 2020). Advertising usually does not occur sporadically, but rather frequently, and in part simultaneously (Hudders et al. 2017). Sometimes it can be skipped or clicked away; in other cases, it is inescapable and sometimes inhibits action. The manifestations are not only diverse but also very dynamic, increasingly personalized, and therefore present online users with a multitude of challenges (Hudders et al. 2017; Iske and Wilde 2017; Radesky et al. 2020; Zarouali et al. 2018). As a consequence, when children use online media, they have to process a lot of information simultaneously and thus, they need to differentiate, e.g., between commercial and non-commercial messages (Hudders et al. 2017). A critical reflection of commercial messages is even more challenging as they are often embedded in entertaining contexts (e.g., games) on which children's attention is focused (Hudders et al. 2017; Zarouali et al. 2019). Accordingly, the demands on children's advertising literacy are immense and online forms of advertising thus require a much higher orientational knowledge and reflectivity than traditional forms of advertising (e.g., in print or on television).

From the perspectives of both law and media education, the central question arises whether children are able to identify different forms of online advertising and to understand the intention of these messages. Even if there are different definitions and concepts of advertising literacy (Zarouali et al. 2018), a basic understanding of advertising and reliable labelling of advertising material is seen as fundamental requirements for children to identify advertising and to be able to deal with it adequately. Developments such as native advertising and influencer marketing, where advertising and editorial content are becoming increasingly blurred, pose further challenges for users. One question that arises is the extent to which the traditional understanding of advertising literacy “as the skills of analyzing, evaluating and

creating persuasive messages across a variety of contexts and media (Young 2003)” (Livingstone and Helsper 2006) still holds or needs to be expanded, e.g. concerning performative and attitudinal aspects (Hudders et al. 2017; Rozendaal 2011; Zarouali et al. 2018).

Already very young users are seen as relevant consumers (Buckingham 2011; Zarouali et al. 2019) and are therefore increasingly being confronted with advertising online, e.g. on journalistic-editorial websites, on pages of commercial or non-commercial providers as well as in videos or games (Radesky et al. 2020; Zarouali et al. 2019). Even if websites of public or non-profit institutions with media educational concerns or of private individuals are generally free of advertising, it is the website or service of commercial providers which dominate the usage habits of younger people (Berg 2019; Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest 2019). Consequently, they do not use only access child-appropriate, but also sites addressed to adolescents and/or adults and are therefore often confronted with challenging kinds of (commercial) content. The classification of online content is demanding in several respects: Children have to identify the communicative context of a website (e.g. children’s page, product page) and its intention (e.g. information, entertainment, persuasion) to classify different elements on a website accordingly. This classification is made more difficult by a high dynamic and the simultaneous appearance of various elements on one page. To be able to identify advertising reliably, children need to understand and know about websites with different intentions that address the user and thus themselves in various roles (e.g., as a consumer, an influencer of family purchasing decisions, an opinion leader, etc.). Besides, they need not only disclosures for advertising but specific characteristics or criteria by which they can identify websites (and website elements) with different intentions. The multitude of possible forms of advertising, the frequently changing and sometimes very short-term offers require the child to continually update, expand and adapt cognitive schemata and performance strategies. Because of increasing personalization strategies, users also need to understand how the display of advertising functions technically and which kind of (short and long-term) effects their own online actions have, e.g., on the on-screen advertising display or their consumer behavior.

2. Children and Online Advertising – Research Overview

In past research, studies on children and (online) advertising have often focused on the questions of whether children recognize advertising as such or whether they understand the persuasive intent of advertising (Aufenanger et al. 2008; Landeszentrale für Medien und Kommunikation Rheinland-Pfalz 2014; Schulze 2013). Concerning the cognitive requirements, the findings show that children from the age of five are able to recognize (certain) forms of advertising (Moore 2004; Zarouali et al. 2018). From

around eight years of age, the majority of children know that it is commercial communication. At eleven to twelve years, they have the cognitive prerequisites to understand the compelling character (Landeszentrale für Medien und Kommunikation Rheinland-Pfalz 2014; Livingstone and Helsper 2006; Radesky et al. 2020; Zarouali et al. 2018). However, this age-related differentiation is only an approximate orientation, as the competencies are also related to both the particular advertising requirements children are confronted with (John 1999) and accordingly the online context and product experiences they make (Moore 2004).

Also, the mere existence of the cognitive prerequisites does not mean that they are actually used (Hudders et al. 2017; Moore 2004) or that children are always able to recognize advertising as such. Especially forms like “camouflaged advertising” (Landeszentrale für Medien und Kommunikation Rheinland-Pfalz 2014) or native advertising are quite challenging to identify, not only for children (Landeszentrale für Medien und Kommunikation Rheinland-Pfalz 2014). Furthermore, recognition alone does not mean that children understand the commercial and persuasive intent of advertising (Andronikidis and Lambrianidou 2010; Roedder John 1999) or that they are immune to these advertising effects (Zarouali et al. 2018). Livingstone and Helsper (2006), as well as Schulze (2013), emphasize that also general media literacy is a relevant factor influencing the understanding of advertising. Based on existing studies, Livingstone and Helsper (2006) conclude, that children of all ages are more or less influenced by advertising, but that there are differences in the advertising features (e.g. celebrities, jingles, features of a product) that appeal to them.

At the time the study was carried out, only a few studies had considered the broad spectrum of online-specific forms of advertising (Aufenanger et al. 2008; Landeszentrale für Medien und Kommunikation Rheinland-Pfalz 2014; Schulze 2013). The findings showed which specific forms of advertising children are more likely to recognize and with which types they sometimes have problems. Besides, the studies indicate that models of advertising literacy, such as those developed and examined in various studies on television advertising (Aufenanger and Neuß 1999; Aufenanger et al. 1995), do not apply to online communication and forms of online advertising, as online advertising demands more complex cognitive skills from children (Schulze 2013).

Meanwhile, there are quite some adequate theoretical approaches and measurements on how children cope with contemporary, mostly embedded advertising formats directed at them. For example, Hudders et al. (2017) refer to a theoretically grounded conceptual framework, regarding automatic affect transfer mechanisms and coping skills such as dispositional and situational advertising literacy. Heterogeneous results on children’s advertising literacy are caused by different frames of references (e.g., TV programmes, websites, video games, influencer marketing) and measurements such as individual interviews, small focus groups and inclusion of proxy respondents (mainly studies with a focus on dispositional advertising literacy)

or standardized visual self-reports and interactive game-playing methods (Zarouali et al. 2018). So far, there have only been few studies that investigate how children perceive and cope with current, more native forms of advertising (e.g. de Pauw 2018).

The study presented here is a further attempt to look at the totality of all available online advertising forms and to examine how children of primary school age – an age at which advertising skills are not yet fully developed – meet these challenges. The study is part of a broader project on children and online advertising that also provided a content analysis of 100 favorite websites of children and a comprehensive presentation of the regulatory framework (Dreyer, Lampert, and Schulze 2014). In this article, we focus on the children’s advertising reception and present partial results of our study. Specifically, we focus on the following research questions: How do children deal with different forms of online advertising, what challenges do they have in dealing with these and what are relevant factors on which the handling of online advertising depends?

3. Theoretical Approach

The theoretical approach of our whole study combines legal and educational approaches. From normative goals concerning the developmental stages of the child and child-specific advertising competence, it is based on constitutional protection obligations that focus on personal rights and the protection of minors, consumer protection and data protection policy. This concept includes ensuring autonomy of action, informational self-determination and social competence. These objectives that should allow a literate media usage and correspond with common definitions of advertising literacy, defined as the ability to recognize, understand and critically reflect upon advertising at the moment of exposure (e.g., de Pauw 2018, with reference to Friestad and Wright 1994). These goals have been broken down into sub-goals (see Table 1).

Autonomy of action	Recognition of advertising
	Understanding the intention
	Reflective conduct (incl. the ability to withstand persuasion and pressure)
Individual self-determination	Self-awareness of the passive acquisition of data
	Awareness of the active data input
Social competence	Placidity
	Social interaction
	Respect
	Sexual-ethical orientation

Tab. 1.: Key goals concerning child development and advertising.

Not only for our research, the definition and operationalization of online advertising in itself are crucial. It is essential to decide whether a broad or narrow, economic, legal or subjective notion of advertising is being used. As the boundaries between commercial and non-commercial communication are increasingly blurring a definition that is too narrow corresponds neither to the user experience nor does it appear to be useful, e.g. in the context of content analysis. By contrast, a description that is too broad makes it impossible to distinguish between advertising and other content. To adequately capture the subject matter, we, therefore, chose an interpretation of advertising, which takes into account both examples that can be clearly identified as advertising and those that can be assumed to have a persuasive intention.¹

Due to increasingly personalized online communication, we also had to consider to what extent the study conditions and methodological decisions (e.g. combination of browser-related settings, search histories and the interactive user input) affect the results or have an influence on displayed advertising content. Besides, we also had to consider that websites often change their structure and even the embedding of advertising at short intervals. These specific challenges were relevant for the reception study presented here. The focus of our research was therefore on the question of how children deal with specific forms of advertising that are individually tailored to the context of use when they are online.

All challenges, mainly posed by the dynamic and multimodal subject matter, rose the question of how we could obtain comparability, reliability and validity, and at the same time take into account children's online practices.

4. Design of the Reception Study

In this text, we reflect selected findings of our reception study against the background of both current studies on advertising literacy and developments in online commercial communication.

In the following, we mainly refer to the findings of a quantitative and qualitative reception analysis with children aged six to eleven (Table 2). Data of the standardized parent surveys, peer-group and teacher interviews provide further information on advertising socialization and education. The different methodological approaches allow different perspectives and degrees of depth regarding the topic. While the representative survey offers an overview of frequencies and distributions of general advertising recognition features, the qualitative reception study allows a look into the handling of advertising in the specific individual case. Individual quotations reflect the children's point of view but only have an illustrative character.

¹ This approach served to broaden the view to potentially commercial forms of online communication but was not subject to the legal assessment.

Quantitative Reception Analysis	Qualitative Reception Analysis
<p>Survey on advertising perception and recognition Individual interviews with children aged 6-11, including information from a parent or guardian (n=633) Subjects <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↳ Internet usage in general ↳ Observation situation ↳ Advertising on selected websites ↳ General understanding of advertising ↳ Communication about advertising at home and in school </p>	<p>Participating observations and interviews <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↳ Standardized parent survey (n=100) ↳ Group interviews/class discussions on the relevance of advertising and brands/products within the peer group (n=6) ↳ Teacher interviews as contextual information on the importance of (online) advertising in schools (n=4) </p>

Tab. 1.: Design of the reception studies

The representative survey was carried out between 11.11.2013 and 08.12.2013 as a CAPI survey with a total of 633 children between six and eleven years and their primary legal guardians.² The average age of the children surveyed is 8.5 years. 51 per cent of the children surveyed are girls, 49 per cent are boys. The questionnaire included questions on general Internet use, on advertising in general (e.g. knowledge of the term, experience with advertising) and online advertising (perception and characteristics of online advertising; identifiers). To survey child-appropriate, we further used screenshots of four selected websites, which represented different kinds of websites and were part of the media analysis. Two advertising and two non-advertising segments were marked on each of these, and the children were asked to classify these segments.

The qualitative reception study was composed of various partial surveys. The focus was on the questioning and observation of primary school children. A total of 100 children from four different primary schools and a daycare center in Hamburg and North Rhine-Westphalia took part in the study on the reception of advertising. The sample of the children participating in the study included 57 girls and 43 boys aged between six and ten years (average age: 8.7 years). Besides, we asked parents by a short questionnaire about the child's Internet equipment and use, their concerns regarding the child's online use, rules for dealing with online advertising, their view on children deal with online advertising, negative experiences with online advertising and their attitude towards online advertising. Besides, we conducted six group interviews (with seven to 18 children of the same class) and four interviews with teachers at the schools involved. The qualitative survey was conducted between September and December 2013. Consent was received from the school authorities in the respective states, the schools and the parents.

2 The population was specified for children between the ages of six and eleven who use the Internet at least occasionally. The prerequisite for participating in the interview with the six- and seven-year-olds was that they had already attended school. Furthermore, the sample was quoted with regard to the characteristics of age, gender, area and size of the town.

The large number of children recruited for the qualitative study seemed sensible and necessary to be able to draw a comprehensive picture of how children deal with advertising. The individual interviews with the elementary school students were carried out in school. In parallel, up to four children were interviewed or observed at the same time. For the survey, we used a flexible interview guideline. For the observation, we chose a selection of ten websites (out of the sample of the most favorite ones), which cover both different types of websites and gender-specific preferences. The sample included Toggo.de, lego.de, kicker.de, wasistwas.de, spielaffe.de, geolino.de, gmx.de, barbie.com, helles-koepfchen.de and youtube.com.³ The selected websites fulfilled two functions: Firstly, they served to observe the extent to which children perceive advertising on these sites. Secondly, they served as stimulus material to get into a conversation with the children about the criteria by which they recognize advertising and about their advertising concepts. Both the mouse movements and the children's comments were recorded with the software Camtasia and also as an audio file. For the analysis of the qualitative data, we used the software MaxQDA.

5. Reception of Online Advertising by 6 to 11 Years Old Children

The reception study focused on children's experiences with (online) advertising and their conceptual understanding. Furthermore, we were interested in the extent to which children of primary school age recognize online advertising on different types of websites and how they deal with it. The quantitative and qualitative findings on these topics are summarized below.

5.1 Experiences With (Online) Advertising

Primary school children have already had a variety of experiences with advertising. Specifically, they know advertising from various contexts – both offline and online. They perceive it in everyday life (e.g. advertising leaflets, offers in the supermarket or advertising pillars on their way to school) and also in traditional media. Almost all children are familiar with television advertising. In the representative survey, three-quarters of the children stated that they had seen advertising on the Internet. They use the Internet occasionally and mostly for entertainment or online research (e.g. about their hobbies or for school). If there are rules for online use, these primarily relate to agreements in terms of time and content. However, many children also mentioned that parents had advised them to avoid paid content or advertisements. Answers of the children showed that it does not always seem possible for them to

³ In the case of YouTube, we decided not to present the home page, but the result when entering "Harry Potter earwig song" to prevent the children from coming into contact with inappropriate content or being overwhelmed by content on the YouTube page.

follow the rules, e.g. when they accidentally click on advertising or when they do not understand why they should not click on it.

In our qualitative study it emerged that many children just internalized that a click on advertisements has negative consequences in any case: *“She [mother] also said, better be careful, don’t click on advertisements, who knows what might happen”* (Shirin, 7 years⁴)

5.2 Cognitive Concepts of Advertising

Almost all children (98%) stated in the representative study that they had heard the term *advertising* and know what advertising and its intent is. Only a small proportion of the children – particularly the younger ones – were unsure. Information, the offering of product purchase opportunities, and the enticement were attributions of the children mostly mentioned in the representative survey as indicators for advertising (*“[...] they show that you always know that you can buy this ...”* (Bente, 9 years old))

In our qualitative study, we found that in their own words, individual priorities and relations to the information aspect of advertising became evident. Some children also referred to the appellative character or the attention-generating function of advertising. However, not all children were able to define advertising, either because of the unfamiliarity or complexity of the subject. It also cannot be excluded that the question cognitively overstrained the children. Several children gave examples or referred to advertisements that they knew from other contexts (e.g. television). In contrast, other children described ads that they had previously identified as such during the interview.

The children surveyed qualitatively had a rather critical, but not undifferentiated attitude towards advertising. For several children, advertising was annoying, when it interrupted the current online use or even made the intended use (i.e. playing a game) impossible (*“Because it’s stupid to be distracted all the time. Because it’s always sort of, sort of swirling around and changing”*, Jette, 8 years old). Otherwise, even if advertisements are boring in terms of content, children seemed to tolerate or accept them as given (*“Yeah... then it gets annoying and then you just have to look at it and it’s annoying”*, Patrick, 8 years old). A quarter of the children rated advertising very positively, mainly if it promotes products that affect their interests.

5.3 Recognition of Online Advertising

At first glance, the children of primary school age seemed quite competent in dealing with online advertising. In the quantitative study, the children mentioned quite many criteria they use to identify advertising (see Table 3). A quarter of the children

4 The names cited here are pseudonyms. The original German quotations were translated by the authors.

said that they focus on the design and labelling (which is consistent with the findings from the qualitative study: *“You can also recognize advertising by the fact that it – because advertising usually also sometimes stands above it”*, Pia, 10 years old). One fifth was focused on price indications or their media or product experiences. Also, some children had structural knowledge, e.g. where advertising is usually placed or how to close a pop-up window.

18 per cent of the children identified all advertising segments considered in the quantitative survey. 84 per cent of the children identified more than half of the ads, 16 per cent identified less than half (none: 2%). The older the children, the more likely they were to recognize these explicit forms of advertising.

Criteria	%	Further explanation of the items
Layout/Design	27%	<i>“... when it looks different from the rest of the page.”</i>
Labelling	26%	<i>“... when it is marked with ‘buy’, ‘advertisement’, ‘advertisement’ or when the price is indicated.”</i>
Cross-media awareness	21%	<i>“... when I know the product/brand [from other contexts].”</i>
Price	21%	<i>“... because sometimes there’s the price.”</i>
Experience with the product	20%	<i>“... because I already know the product.”</i>
Closing option	15%	<i>“... because there is an ‘x’ at the top right with which you can close the window.”</i>
Structural knowledge	14%	<i>“... because there’s always advertising at this point” (8%) “... because the advertising is always on the same place on a web page.” (6%)*</i>

Tab. 1.: Distinction criteria (only items mentioned by more than 10%), Base: all children, n = 633; in per cent.

However, in the specific qualitative research setting, in which the children had to decide immediately in which cases advertising was involved, it became clear to what extent the children could apply their cognitive advertising concept to the visual forms of advertising (*“Mhm. Sometimes you can’t distinguish between these things”*, Marleen, 9 years old). The observation showed that children – even if they use an extensive portfolio of advertising features to assess potentially commercial content – were not able to identify all forms of advertising equally reliably (*“Now I’m not so sure if this is advertising exactly”*, Martin, 8 years old). These results might be related to the fact that the forms of advertising were not always separated clearly from the editorial content. Another explanation might be that the distinction criteria of the children did not apply. In the exercise of identifying advertisements on given web pages, we observed that the children were looking for clues that they could use to differentiate between different types of content. This strategy can lead to confusion or incorrect attributions because the children’s advertising distinction criteria sometimes also fit

with editorial content. Some children failed to recognize certain types of advertising, whereas they (mistakenly) identified editorial content as advertising.

Pop-ups and pre-rolls have often been recognized as advertising, which may be related to the fact that many children are familiar with this type from cinema or television programs. A lot of children found this type of advertising distracting, disturbing and annoying. It became clear that many, but by far not all children know how to skip or click away such advertising. However, when trying to close the pop-up during the observation session, several children accidentally ended up on other websites and did not know how to return to the previous site.

In summary, it became evident that the understanding of advertising is not only dependent on the age and cognitive development of the child. Based on the findings, we developed a multidimensional model on dealing with advertising (see Figure 1). According to this, the way children deal with online advertising depends on the portfolio of distinction criteria, the general knowledge on advertising and the ability to contextualize a website content according to the type of website (e.g., editorial versus product website). These aspects are in turn determined by the cognitive development, the overall online experience as well as the experience with specific online programs and services and finally the general media socialization, which includes both advertising and consumer socialization of children.

6. Conclusion

The results of the reception study confirm that children today face many challenges when it comes to recognizing commercial communication as such. Furthermore, the findings show that the way children deal with different forms of online advertising depends on several factors.

Dealing with online advertising is partly due to the recognition of advertisements: A more comprehensive portfolio of distinguishing features of advertising increases the probability that the advertising scheme will work in as many cases as possible. Wrong attributions can sometimes occur if the distinguishing features are transferred in a generalized and unreflected way (e.g., if all dynamic elements on a website are considered and classified as advertising).

The way children deal with advertising also depends on their understanding and conception of advertising: According to the child definition of advertising (e.g., advertising is informative, wants to seduce, is uninteresting or annoying), it attracts different attention and is evaluated differently.

Another important aspect is the contextual framing of an advertisement, e.g., whether the form of advertising itself appears in a commercial or (journalistic) editorial context. The context has an impact on user expectations, on user's evaluation

and (indirectly) on the recognizability of advertising.⁵ The qualitative reception study showed that some children were able to identify product and manufacturer websites as commercial because the entire website was framed and designed accordingly.

In turn, the recognition of advertising is determined by other factors: These include the child's cognitive development. The children interviewed in our study (6-11 years old) have the cognitive ability to take on a third-person perspective. Some children referred to this aspect in their advertising definition more than others, although no further age differences could be identified. On the other hand, the way children deal with online advertising and the development of cognitive schemes depend on which kind of website and, accordingly, which forms of advertising the children had already come into contact with. Children whose online experiences were based on only a few (mainly ad-free) websites showed a more limited advertising recognition on sites they were unfamiliar with than children who had more diverse online backgrounds. Based on their online experiences, children develop basic structural knowledge that helps to identify and also anticipate advertising (e.g., before games or at a specific place on the page, where advertising often appears). Advertising experiences are also relevant for the framing of online-content (e.g., as a game or as product information).

Finally, the overall media socialization has emerged as an essential factor (see also: Schulze 2013). This also includes aspects of advertising and consumer socialization, the attitudes of parents towards advertising, influences of parents and siblings on children's understanding of advertising, but also children's direct and indirect online experiences. Some children have seen online advertising in the context of parental online use. Others mentioned that their parents use the Internet to find out about products or to order something. Some parents were entrepreneurs themselves so that the children experienced online advertising from different perspectives. However, growing up in digitally connected and commercialized spaces does not automatically imply a critical reflection on online advertising (see also: Iske and Wilde 2017). Furthermore, our findings indicate that the parents neither gave their children any clues on how they could recognize advertising on the Internet nor explained why the children should be aware when surfing online. Consequently, some children had the relatively diffuse concept that even an accidental click can have per se negative consequences (*"Umh, yeah, because, umh, if I press the wrong button or if I accidentally press it, I think I bought something"*, Leila, 8 years old).

⁵ Hudders et al. (2017), as well as Hudders and Cauberghe (2018), make a quite similar distinction between dispositional and a "specific, situational advertising literacy that is triggered when children are exposed to a commercial message" (Hudders and Cauberghe 2018).

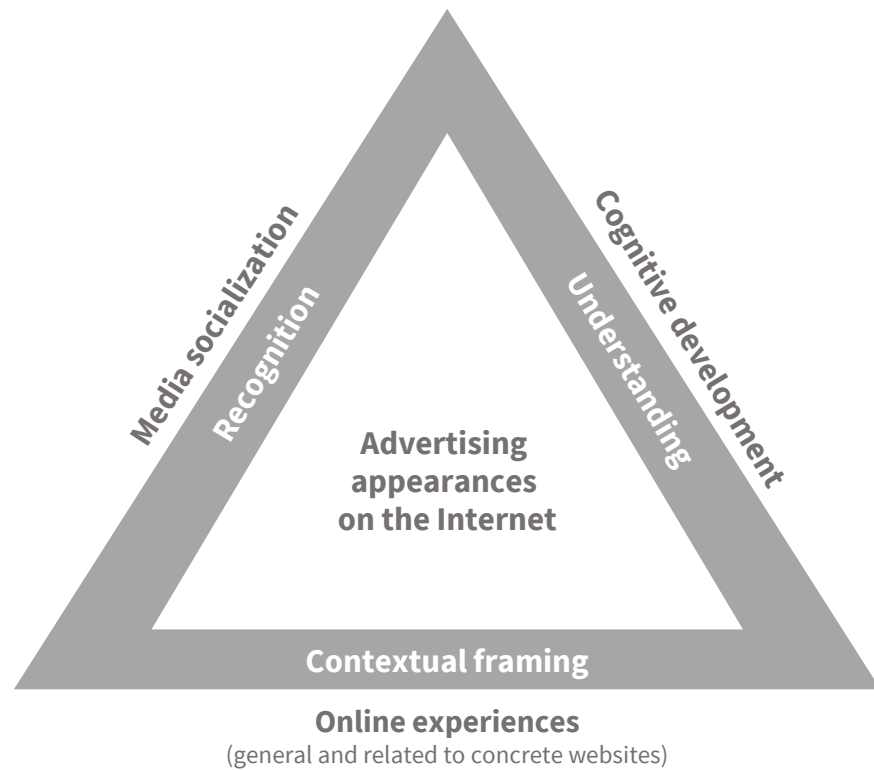


Fig. 1.: Model for dealing with advertising forms on the Internet (Dreyer, Lampert, and Schulze 2014, 328 [translated]).

Against the background of the model, different combinations of the factors are conceivable, which lead to very individual practices dealing with online advertising. The various facets of the model offer starting points for further discussions and also media education, e.g., concerning the promotion of both advertising and consumer literacy (Schlegel-Matthies 2016).

To develop reliable advertising skills, children need support from parents and teachers. Previous studies have shown that how parents deal with advertising has an influence on how brands are remembered (e.g. Hudders and Cauberghe 2018; Naderer and Matthes 2016). It also became evident that a restrictive approach to advertising stands in the way of effective consumer socialization and the development of appropriate ways of dealing with advertising. In this respect, our study showed that children often get confusing and sometimes conflicting signals from parents. On the one hand, they get parental warnings like “Don’t click on it!”; on the other hand, children observe that their parents use the Internet to inform themselves about products and to order products online. In our quantitative survey, 60 per cent of children stated that they have talked to their parents about advertising; 20 per cent of parents reported using advertising blockers, which is unfavorable when parents then

no longer communicate with their children about advertising. Since many parents also have difficulties on recognizing increasingly embedded forms of commercial communication as such, appropriate approaches are needed to improve parental advertising mediation (Hudders and Cauberghe 2018; Reijmersdal and Rozendaal 2020; Zarouali et al. 2019). Some resources for parents on children and online advertising have been developed in recent years but could be more widely disseminated and used (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend und Landesanstalt für Medien 2014; Klicksafe 2017; Radesky et al. 2020; see also Media Smart e. V. 2009). However, there is still a lack of studies investigating the effectiveness of parental mediation strategies (Hudders et al. 2017).

School is also a valuable player to foster advertising literacy (Hudders et al. 2017; Zarouali et al. 2019). But at the time of the study, online advertising was hardly an issue (at most advertising in general) and still not anchored in the curricula for primary schools in many States. Little is also even known about the effectiveness of advertising literacy programs in primary schools (Nelson 2016). Hudders et al. (2017) emphasize that future advertising literacy approaches should not only focus on the improvement of cognitive advertising literacy but also on affective and moral advertising literacy to enable children to deal better with embedded forms of advertising in particular. In this context, schools are also required to develop concepts that can be applied to newer and upcoming forms of (embedded) advertising (Reijmersdal and Rozendaal 2020).

Within our study, we also had to deal with the challenges and effects of tracking and profiling strategies, which we could only consider marginally since we were focusing on the online content. Given the increasing spread of personalized advertising, such techniques have to be considered even more in future studies. Parents also should be informed about these forms of commercial communication practices and possibilities to prevent negative consequences such as advertising with age-inappropriate content based on parents' profile data (Radesky et al. 2020). Setting up a separate profile for the child could be one useful and helpful option in this context. But Radesky et al. (2020, 4) also pointed to "measures in place in children's digital media environments to protect their needs".

7. Limitations and Further Research

Although the findings are consistent with results from other studies and have contributed to the development of the model shown above, some limitations should be mentioned. First of all, it is essential to note that in the study focusing on the recognizability of online advertisements, we only considered one facet of advertising literacy, which according to Hudders et al. (2017), can be assigned to the dimension of cognitive advertising literacy. Other dimensions, such as moral and attitudinal

advertising literacy played a subordinate role. On the one hand, this is because we oriented our design according to studies available at the time the study was planned, which were more grounded in communication science and pedagogy than psychology. On the other hand, of course, the funding by a State Media Authority and Ministry Family Affairs also influences the alignment of the study already through the call for applications, which in our case is reflected in a common concept of media literacy based on legal and educational perspectives. Moreover, the project period (2012-2014) must also be mentioned as a limitation. In the last years, the online forms of advertising with which children come into contact have become enormously differentiated. Nowadays, children are confronted with even more complex requirements (e.g., personalized forms of advertising, influencer marketing), which make it difficult for them to identify forms of commercial communication reliably. Future studies will have to take these changes and challenges into account.

Nevertheless, we see in our findings important indications for central and necessary skills of primary school children in dealing with forms of advertising they are confronted within the context of their online use. Furthermore, our approach to be as close as possible to the children's real online use also enabled us to take into account both the dispositional and the situational aspects of advertising literacy (Hudders et al. 2017), which – in addition to general aspects of socialization – have proven to be relevant in our model.

From a research perspective, we believe that due to personalization techniques, it will be more challenging in the future (methodologically) to conduct a comprehensive and comparative study on advertising perception and impact, which also covers children's online usage practices. As suggested by, e.g., Zarouli et al. (2018), qualitative research methods may be particularly suitable to explore more deeply how children cope with the respective complexity of advertising. Besides, future research projects should also consider the influence of advertising literacy, e.g., on consumer preferences and behavior (Dam and Reijmersdal 2019; Zarouali et al. 2019).

Finally, future discussions and research on advertising literacy have to consider both the changing media landscape and online usage of children (especially with regard to Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and future social media services) as well as current and upcoming challenges about commercial communication like advertising in apps and mobile games, influencer marketing on social media and other forms of native, hybrid or embedded advertising (Reijmersdal and Rozendaal 2020; Zarouali et al. 2019). These changes pose significant new challenges not only for advertising and media education but also for advertising regulation and research.

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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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‘Alexa, Adv(ert)ise us!’

How Smart Speakers and Digital Assistants Challenge Advertising Literacy Amongst Young People

Michael Haas  and Anna Keller 

Abstract

Digital assistants increasingly infiltrate the world of children. The way they function reminds us somewhat of playmates, nannies and tutors. So far, educators have only marginally dealt with this new media phenomenon, yet the use of smart speakers by young people offers many opportunities as well as challenges. These are elaborated in this article and classified in terms of media education. Firstly, we will address a definition of smart speakers and digital speech assistants, and then examine their use by means of usage data. We will then concentrate on examining the extent to which these smart technologies play a role in the environments of young people. What forms of advertising are there? What data do digital assistants collect? And finally, how can parents, educators and companies ensure that smart technologies are used in a child-friendly manner that complies with data protection regulations? Our aim is to nudge the phenomenon of smart speakers and speech assistants into the media-pedagogical focus. Dealing with the specific characteristics of smart speakers requires a high degree of (child) user competence. As we will show in the conclusion, there are further pedagogically beneficial approaches from the point of view of promoting advertising literacy.

«Alexa, adv(ert)ise us!». Smart Speaker, digitale Sprachassistenten und deren Herausforderungen für die Werbekompetenzvermittlung an junge Menschen

Zusammenfassung

Digitale Sprachassistenten erreichen zunehmend auch die Lebenswelt von Kindern. Sie erinnern in ihren Funktionen teilweise an Spielkameraden, Kindermädchen und Hauslehrer. Die Pädagogik hat sich mit diesem neuen Medienphänomen bisher nur marginal auseinandergesetzt. Dabei liegen in der Nutzung von Smart Speakern durch junge Menschen viele Chancen, aber auch Herausforderungen. Diese werden in diesem Artikel herausgearbeitet und medienpädagogisch eingeordnet. Wir beginnen mit einer Definition von Smart Speakern und digitalen Sprachassistenten, um dann deren Gebrauch anhand von Nutzungsdaten zu beleuchten. Im nächsten Schritt widmen wir uns der Frage, inwieweit diese smarten Technologien in der Lebenswelt von jungen Menschen eine Rolle

spielen. Welche Formen von Werbung gibt es dort? Welche Daten sammeln Sprachassistenten? Und: Wie können Eltern, Pädagoginnen, Pädagogen und Unternehmen für eine kindgerechte, datenschutzkonforme Nutzung smarter Technologien sorgen? Unser Ziel ist es, das Phänomen Smart Speaker und digitale Sprachassistenten ein Stück weiter ins medienpädagogische Visier zu rücken. Der Umgang mit den spezifischen Eigenheiten von Smart Speakern bedarf eines hohen Masses an (kindlicher) Nutzungskompetenz. Wie wir abschliessend aufzeigen werden, ergeben sich aus Sicht der Werbekompetenzförderung weitere pädagogisch gewinnbringende Ansatzpunkte.

1. Digital Assistants: A New Frontier for Media Education

“We are in year zero of the voice revolution”, said Google employee Lionel Mora in late 2018 at the Smart Voice Summit in Paris (as cited in Lobe 2018).

Digital voice assistants are now standard companions in the everyday lives of many people: in their cars, mobile phones and homes. They can be used to play games, listen to music, research information, shop, operate household appliances and more, all simply by voice command. With smart speakers such as Amazon’s Echo and Apple’s Homepod, they have made their way into living rooms, bedrooms and kitchens via stand-alone devices – and into children’s rooms, too.

Smart speakers and voice assistants make media and potentially advertising content more accessible in the private sphere by using a tool which even young children have command over: the voice. ‘Smart’ in this context signifies, on the one hand, the interactivity between user and digital assistant. A central smart feature is that anyone who uses a smart speaker or other voice-controlled device communicates seamlessly with a globally connected technical device. The speech assistant collects user data from each of these interactions and continuously learns from them. On the other hand, users can be offered more targeted, group-specific content and more appropriate recommendations through networking and the associated user profiling of the device.

In this way, the device not only assists people in simple and repetitive everyday situations (such as controlling household appliances or providing simple information), but also offers them support in their role as consumers. Firstly, voice assistants, by knowing their users very well, are able to make personalised recommendations which are very convenient to accept and/or to be consumed by the user. Secondly, purchasing becomes easier, even for the youngest consumers, because a product can now be ordered online simply by voice command. This results in an attractive new business field for the advertising industry – and entails enormous challenges for media education.

The central questions that arise are:

- What does the development of smart technologies mean for young people, considering in their role as consumers as well?
- Is there a need for action from a pedagogical point of view and with regard to the well-being of the child?

The following article analyses these questions from a media-pedagogical perspective.

2. What Are Smart Speakers and Digital Assistants?

In this section, we outline fundamental knowledge on the topic in order to create consciousness about smart speakers and digital voice assistants, including within the context of advertising and forms of advertisements. Part of this basic knowledge includes clarification of the relevance for this current topic, using user data. We will begin with a definition of terms.

- Smart speakers are ‘intelligent’ loudspeakers with integrated microphones, which are connected to the Internet via Wi-Fi and/or Bluetooth and can be operated by voice command. Examples include Amazon’s Echo, Apple’s Homepod or Google’s Home. Smart speakers are available in different shapes and with or without screens. They are the hardware, the material housing for smart software. Smart speakers can be classified as calm technology, defined as systems that are integrated into their environment in an inconspicuous and natural manner (Kahle and Meissner 2020, 19). Sieber classifies smart speakers such as Alexa and Siri as superbots, dialogue robots of the digital platform economy (Sieber 2019, 88), that possess a tremendous scope of personalised and intimate data about their owners (ibid., 92).
- Digital assistants/voice services, on the other hand, are cloud-based speech recognition programs, i. e. software that can recognise and analyse human speech and respond to it and/or execute commands by computer voice. Originally, speech assistants such as Siri and Google Assistant were used on mobile phones. Today they are also found in numerous other smart devices, including smart speakers, smart TVs, wearables, PCs (Microsoft’s Cortana), smart toys and smart home equipment, such as refrigerators and blinds that can be controlled by voice service. The most widely used voice assistant for stand-alone devices is currently Amazon’s Alexa (Beyto 2020, 18). Numerous companies from various branches are developing their own smart speakers, including Sonos, IKEA and Telekom.
- Skills/actions are advanced functions that any private or commercial third-party can develop and provide for smart speakers. So far in Europe, this is only possible for Alexa or Google Assistant. Everyone is enabled to offer a skill or an action

on the platform of the corresponding company. Users can activate these skills/actions for their software as required. They are available in various categories, from games and news to special children's skills/actions. The latter are subject to an examination by the companies following certain guidelines regarding data protection and advertising-free and suitable content.¹

2.1 Data Concerning the Use of Smart Speakers and Voice Assistants

It is not surprising that smart speakers have become part of everyday life, even for users who are not interested in technology. One in four adults in Germany owns at least one smart speaker, and in fact, that proportion rises to one in three among those under 35 years of age (Beyto 2020, 7 and 17).²

Speech assistants are used by technology-oriented users primarily for four things: streaming services (music, audio books), smart home applications, information retrieval and everyday organisation (ibid., 46). In a broader study that not only includes people interested in technology, audio streaming is also among the most common uses, but smart home applications are not mentioned (RMS 2019, 14)³. There is a consensus in all surveys considered that entertainment is the main field of use, followed by online research in the broadest sense.

At present, shopping by voice command seems to play only a minor role in Germany (Beyto 2020, 57; RMS 2019). According to Beyto (2020, 8), however, 85% of technology enthusiasts can at least imagine shopping on the internet using voice assistants in the future. It can also be assumed that, at least for repetitive standard purchases and intangible services such as streaming offers, shopping by voice command will become more frequent.

In German surveys on the use of voice assistants, children and young people have so far played a subordinate role. In the KIM study, only the smart TV is mentioned, which 27% of children between six and thirteen use at least occasionally, and the 'digital voice box', which 6% use regularly (Feierabend, Rathgeb, and Reutter 2019, 29). According to the same study however, smart speakers are only present in 6% of

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- 1 It would go beyond the scope of this paper to discuss whether and to what extent these guidelines can be disobeyed by the skill developers. The guidelines can be found in the Alexa Skills Kit (Amazon 2020) and in the Policies for Actions on Google (Google 2020).
 - 2 "In March 2020, 2,042 people took part in an online survey by YouGov Germany GmbH. The results were weighted and are representative for the German population 18 years old and up. Also in March 2020, the detailed patterns of smart speaker use by 1,196 technophile adult Germans (recruited over social media) were furthermore examined through an online survey" (ibid., 20).
 - 3 In this study, 9,976 online users between 16 and 69 years old in Germany were interviewed, of which 2,282 were active smart speaker users (= in the last 14 days).

households with children (ibid., 8).⁴ In contrast, 90% of children between six and thirteen can theoretically access smartphones within the family (ibid.).⁵ 39% have their own smartphone (ibid., 9).⁶

According to a study by Beyto, 75% of smart speakers owned by technology-oriented users are located in the living room, followed by the kitchen and the bedroom. A full 16% are in the children's bedroom (Beyto 2020, 44).

In the U.S. compared to Germany, the everyday use of smart speakers by children seems to have become much more established. For example, in an online survey of parents who have a child between two and eight years of age (n=1.127), 52% of them stated that their child interacts with a smart speaker several times a day to several times a week (Wronski 2019). The most common uses here are listening to music, homework help, obtaining information, having fun and listening to jokes (ibid.).

10% of the parents surveyed also stated that they find smart speakers "extremely helpful" in organising everyday family life and 19% find them "very helpful" (ibid.). 29% found them at least "slightly helpful" and 30% "moderately helpful" (ibid.). "Not at all helpful" (ibid.) was stated by only 11% of the parents (ibid.).

Thus, although smart speakers are not yet strongly anchored in the lives of children in Germany, the figures presented here indicate that this could soon change.

2.2 Advertising Forms in the Context of Smart Speakers and Digital Assistants

Digital media and their channels always offer new terrain for marketing strategies and advertising messages. Smart speakers are thus also expanding the repertoire of advertising forms which are of central importance for media education. The special aspect lies in the 'smart' way of conveying informative and persuasive messages to young, inexperienced consumers.

The fact that companies are highly interested in smart advertising is shown by the numerous developments in voice commerce strategies (Radiozentrale 2019). Marketing agencies determine voice search readiness (Y. Sievers 2019), i. e. how well companies can be found via online voice searching and offer targeted campaigns for smart listening (Paperlein 2018)⁷. In addition, there are innovations in hardware such

4 In regard to the above-mentioned studies, this low number might be a surprise. The number results from 1,231 children and their main educators being interviewed, whereas the above-mentioned studies did not refer explicitly to this group. The KIM authors mention «digital speech assistants such as Alexa by Amazon» (Feierabend, Rathgeb, and Reutter 2019, 8). The low number could as such indicate that they mean stand-alone devices such as Echo, rather than the software itself.

5 The fact that there are smartphones used within the family does not, however, necessarily mean that children are allowed to use them.

6 In view of these numbers, the low number of children using digital assistants in the KIM study (see above) is further astonishing, considering that in most cases, smartphones have a pre-installed digital assistant.

7 An example in practice is the AXE audio spot by Unilever. Listeners can actively order a product sample of the deodorant during the spot via voice command (Gundelach 2020).

as hearables, smart headphones which promote the spread of smart audio advertising, as well as original voice-based ‘incentives’, such as vouchers which work via dynamic voice activation from within the advertisement.

Clearly recognisable advertising

Clearly recognisable advertising in the traditional sense has hardly ever been heard on smart speakers so far. Excluded from this are of course those advertising formats which are also broadcast via other audio media, such as radio advertising and commercials via streaming services such as Spotify. In addition, in the systematics of smart audio devices, persuasive messages are more likely to be placed via alternative means, as will be shown below.

Interactive voice advertising

A central feature of smart speakers is their interactivity. Communication takes place in both directions: Users ask, and the machine answers. Compared to the traditional radio format, smart speaker users can select and direct audio content more specifically. In the words of marketing company Mediascale: “Audio [is] now clickable” (Pauker 2019). It is nothing new that brand ambassadors can approach users in a quasi-informative way, with advertising prepared in the sense of native advertising. What is new, however, are approaches to transferring this form of advertising to smart speakers: With native audio or voice enabled content, interested smart speaker listeners can switch to an interview with a company representative through the help of a voice assistant and thus learn more about a brand or product. The advertisement can also be interrupted and cancelled by voice command (Mediascale 2020).⁸

Content marketing through skills and actions

Smart audio opens up a further option through which content and services (which in principle can be produced and/or provided by anyone) arrive in the home i. e. via voice interface. Skills or actions make this possible. They are developed by third parties and to a large extent, their content is also determined by these parties. Such apps offer individuals, companies, and interest groups new possibilities for commercial content marketing, but in principle these apps also offer opportunities for ideological purposes. The quality criteria are not always clearly visible to consumers. For example, a skill of a political party with corresponding ideological positions can be found in ‘news’, i. e. a section in which objective information is actually expected.⁹

8 This format was tested in 2019 in a field test by the marketing agencies Mediascale and RMS on radio channels such as Antenne Bayern and bigFM with brand promoters from Oddset, Mini, Consors Bank. The results showed, according to the marketing agencies, an increased popularity of the brands (ibid).

9 This skill can be found in the Alexa Skills on Amazon: <https://www.amazon.de/Alternative-f%C3%BCr-Deutschland-AfD-Kompakt/dp/B0743BC7TG>. Last accessed October 20, 2020.

As demonstrated here, smart technology is enjoying growing popularity among adolescents as well. Educators are therefore compelled to deal with this topic. In order to use smart speakers competently, it is essential to know and understand their specific characteristics: Media content can be encoded or processed, linked, transmitted and integrated into everyday life in an unprecedented way. Prime examples of this development are the new forms of advertising outlined in this paper, namely, “interactive voice advertising” and “content marketing”. In contrast to traditional forms of advertising, there are for example no formal markers when it comes to smart speakers in the sense of visual or audiovisual separation between the start and end of the advertising spot. In particular, children could have serious difficulty differentiating between objective information about a product or service and advertising. Another difficulty arises from the fact that Alexa and co. are so integrated into our daily processes, and thus to an increasing extent, they are not perceived as a medium for advertising.

3. Smart Technologies Under Review

In this section, we take a critical look at the topic of smart speakers and digital voice assistants. Further central challenges for media education arise when viewed from this perspective.

3.1 Ubiquitous Advertising and Enticements

Online shopping with the digital assistant is, from a child’s perspective, somewhat magical: You express a wish and it comes true. The buying process becomes particularly low-threshold when shopping by voice command: you don’t even have to click the ubiquitous ‘buy now’ button to order something.

This process completes the dematerialisation of means of payment that has driven traditional online shopping. No money, symbolic shopping cart or credit card is visible when you buy something. From this perspective, shopping can become a rather casual act.¹⁰

This means that even children who cannot or may not yet ‘surf the net’ can theoretically fulfil their own consumer wishes merely with the power of their words. In the meantime, companies have integrated obstacles such as PINs into smart software in order to protect users from deregulated orders. This usually solves the practical problem of voice-command unauthorised purchases by adolescents, but the more casual and ubiquitous temptations in the home remain.

¹⁰ In a study carried out among 8- to 13-year-olds (2016), Naderer et al. show that even a fictitious payment with credit card (compared to cash payment in a Monopoly game) strongly abstracts players’ payment processes. We would like to illustrate that in the context of smart technologies, this degree of abstraction increases even more significantly.

3.2 *Procuring Information via Search Engines*

Voice search leads to new competition in search engine optimisation (Vlahos 2019, 209), driving suppliers into competition to occupy the first search result. At the same time, this circumstance might lead to the implication that “we live in a world where facts are simple and absolute” (ibid., 219) and seemingly, information management can easily be carried out using voice assistants. However, when considering the fact that only one result is shown at a time, access and/or provision of widespread information cannot be guaranteed.

The attempt to influence the user during research and shopping processes manifests itself in the following: On the one hand, customer loyalty is rewarded with convenient, personalised service. On the other hand, the search for alternative offers becomes more complicated. Brand loyalty can be consolidated more easily and the market power of the corresponding global players grows. Meanwhile, the possibly limited selection of products and offers which are not named by the assistant thus appear non-existent to consumers. This makes consumers in general and children in particular dependent on specific brands and products because they simply do not know about the alternatives.

This effect can be seen as a strong gatekeeper effect within the use of smart speakers based on algorithms. In contrast to traditional gatekeepers, the gatekeeper effect within algorithms is defined by the way in which it is non-transparent, accelerated and affect-driven (Sieber 2019, 37f), which makes it even harder to expose, especially for children. Moreover, smaller children are not yet able to access information through reading. Yet, with the existence of a smart speaker in their household, they can access information through voice command. Within the smart speakers position as a gatekeeper, children only have access to a limited and externally selected quantity of information, which may lead to restricted knowledge.

Furthermore, the aspect of the gatekeeper scenario outlined above can be applied not only to commercial advertising but also generally to all kinds of information (Sieber 2019, 37). Opinion is, at times, thus constituted on the basis of a chosen search engine and recommendation by the digital assistant, i. e. by the company behind it:

“Search engine operators, who like Google have a significant market share in many countries, act as a kind of gatekeeper for research nowadays. They are the first port of call for many people” (Nocun and Lamberty 2020, 125).

Smart speaker technology is also establishing another popular media channel that can be used by third parties, such as political groups and individuals, to convey meaning to young people in the form of opinions, content, etc.: Through skills and actions, it is thus in principle possible for them to be confronted with persuasive messages in a ‘smart’ way, even in their private lives.

3.3 Dishonest Anthropomorphism

Before smart speakers were developed, communication was a “human-only process” (Guzman 2018, 2) which concentrated for a very long time on the interaction between two human beings. With Human-Machine Communication, a new concept and area of communication research evolved. It focuses on the “creation of meaning among humans and machines and the study of this meaning-making and related aspects” (ibid.). In this context, technology is further expanded, according to Guzman. When it comes to Human-Machine Communication, the technology becomes more than a channel or a medium because it takes on the role of a communicator (ibid., 3).¹¹

Sieber refers to boundary shifting between human and mechanic communication when talking about communication robots (Sieber 2019, 163). He describes this development as “a dialogue change (Dialogwende)” (ibid., 5). Accordingly, the new voice services change the way we interact with technology and blur barriers between human relationships and digital ones.

This is a controversial point in terms of media education. Since humans are not yet accustomed to these new forms of communication, when dealing with robot technology, they often tend to react as if they were in the presence of a human – even if they know that they are interacting with a machine (Leong and Selinger 2019, 300). In other words, humans tend to attribute human attributes to robots and artificial intelligence. In light of this observation and following Kaminski et al. (2017), Leong and Selinger refer to the power of anthropomorphism and the potential for abuse that lies behind this insight:

“Unlike simply tricking the user into a misunderstanding, dishonest anthropomorphism leverages people’s intrinsic and deeply ingrained cognitive and perceptual weaknesses against them” (ibid.).

Therefore, producers of smart technology fundamentally possess a powerful tool which can use Human-Machine Communication to create, for example, emotional connections (ibid., 300) or trigger protective instincts (ibid., 304). It is not surprising that studies show robots can “effectively gain compliance from humans using message strategies” (Lee and Liang 2018, 128).

Thinking about children’s naivety and their lack of experience, it is safe to say that children might define their smart speaker or digital speech assistant as a digital ‘Mary Poppins’ or digital ‘playmate in a box’, with whom they can communicate, play music and be entertained. This all happens without a picture, purely via listening.

¹¹ A further discussion of an interesting approach to Human-Machine Communication would go beyond the scope of this paper.

3.4 Gender Biases

Smart technology does not only possess, as demonstrated, the potential for an emotional connection between a human and a machine. Through human-machine interactions, patterns of behaviour arise that can then be transferred to human-human interactions (Kudina 2019, 110). On this topic, an often criticised point is that, in addition to the fear of “command-based interaction” (ibid., 111), nearly all voice assistants are programmed with the voice of a young woman and many responses correspond to a traditional division of roles. Manufacturing companies have, according to their own statements, conceived these voice assistants regardless of gender. Nonetheless, UNESCO found out in their report entitled “I’d blush, if I could” (West, Kraut, and Chew 2019), that the female voices of the voice assistants and their playful, consistently friendly and servile answers consolidate gender-based prejudices. The title of the report refers to an example of a response from the voice assistant to a sex-based insult which a producer had programmed up until recently. Given that children do not possess the reflective capability necessary to differentiate between various contexts of interactions, they require support from parents and educators in this learning process.

In summary, the sub-section “Smart technologies under review” clarifies the breadth of the spectrum in which user competence is urgently needed:

- To a certain extent, smart speakers and digital voice assistants promote the common and ever-present temptation to consume, and therefore children are exposed to this as well. In this context, user competence signifies being aware of these temptations and being able to choose what one actually wishes to purchase/consume right now, or whether the user is simply being influenced in a certain way.
- Those who use smart speakers competently view information procurement via voice search cautiously and are capable of questioning the results and even checking them against other sources.
- Those who use smart speakers competently possess a high degree of reflective capacity, such that even when using these tools regularly, they do not absorb a pedagogically undesirable behavioural pattern (e.g. “gender bias”).

However, there are manipulative influences that have penetrated the daily lives of children. Within the context of this ‘dishonest anthropomorphism’, pedagogical measures to promote advertising literacy could reach their limits. As a result, the development of artificial intelligence must be carefully reviewed, since it must be ensured that when children use media, there is no damage to the human person, either on the individual level or on the social level. Accordingly, this sub-section seeks to sensitise the perception for ethical limits of smart technology.

4. Competent Daily Use of Smart Technology

Competent use of media is built on the foundation that users – naturally also in their role as consumers – can participate in the global market of possibilities in a self-determined and reflective way. This includes the option to withdraw from this market at any time and to separate one's own private life from it. With regard to digital voice assistants, the focus in this section is now shifting to the issues of privacy, security settings and data protection.

4.1 Which Data is Passed on to Whom?

Smart speakers have added another dimension to data transmission in everyday life and questioned the nature of intimacy and private conversations (Vlahos 2019, 197). On the one hand, data is no longer transmitted only by an individual and his or her personal device, such as a mobile phone, but by the smart speaker as a fixed entity of a household community that can be used by everyone. Even if there are several devices in a house, they are usually interconnected, since that is what makes the technology of a smart home so attractive.

In addition, even without voice profiles, numerous data points are passed on unfiltered to smart speaker companies. Of course, this is also the case when using other internet-capable devices. A big difference with the smart speaker, however, is that data transmission can be restricted in principle, but only at the expense of the functionality of the device.

What exactly is stored and for how long depends on the company. In principle, the more personalised the service of the smart speaker, the more personal the information it requires. Another unique feature of smart speakers is that they can be integrated into (family) everyday life in their role as digital assistants, correspondingly 'smart'. It can be assumed that not all users are aware that every single interaction with the speech assistant is recorded and stored. In addition to meta-information such as location, serial number of the smart speaker and optional individual information such as shopping and contact lists, voices are also recorded by the smart speaker automatically. This biometric data makes users almost one hundred percent identifiable – even for companies.¹²

¹² Furthermore, marketing agencies work on optimising the targeting on smart devices for commercial purposes. RMS, for example, presented an audio data management platform on the DMECXO 2018 through which smart speaker users are trackable via Listener ID instead of cookies. This makes user profiling more exact, which is very useful for the advertisement industry (Stüdemann 2019).

In summary, this means:

“If a smart speaker is used a lot, it can not only create individual profiles over the course of time using the collected data, but also read out entire social structures in the household: When does the family leave the house? What are the eating and leisure habits of the family? When is the child alone? Who comes to visit? What Amazon, Google and Co. do with the data of their users and how long they store it remains all too opaque” (A. Sievers 2019).

4.2 *Inadvertent Activation of Voice Assistants and Saving of Recordings*

Privacy is a sensitive issue in this context because in principle, voice assistants always listen. Technically speaking, they must be in ‘listening mode’ so that the microphones can hear the corresponding activation word and receive voice commands. Only then should they listen actively.

This does not always work properly. In addition to occasional headlines about accidentally activated speech assistants (Koch 2017, amongst others), the media-pedagogical institution jugendschutz.net has shown in a test that speech assistants sometimes also respond when words similar to the activation word are said, e.g. “Alexander” or “Ok, Kuchen” [speaking of ‘cake’ in German instead of asking the assistant to “Ok, Google”] (A. Sievers 2019).

Moreover, children especially, with their high voices and individual language development, are particularly often misunderstood by speech assistants and can theoretically activate them more easily by mistake (ibid.).

From the perspective of data protection, such cases of inadvertent activation are questionable because in this way, information is passed from private individuals to companies without the persons concerned being aware of it. Companies claim to be working on the elimination of the sources of error. Today, smart speakers already have several types of privacy controls such as “activation word, mute button, audio logs, speaker recognition” (Mhaidli et al. 2019, 253), but full security has not been achieved yet.

4.3 *Risk of Interception and Hacking*

The problem that 100% protection of privacy does not exist for smart speakers is also suggested by some cases that have been published in the media:

- Several smart speaker companies have confirmed that they have randomly listened to call recordings in order to improve the software (Gollmer 2019).
- A project of the Security Research Labs research institute has demonstrated the vulnerability of smart speaker systems to hacker attacks. In this project, fake phishing messages were distributed among smart speaker users via voice assistants (SRLabs 2019).

- In 2017, the German Federal Network Agency banned the sale and possession of a smart child's doll. According to the reasoning, the doll was a camouflaged transmitter in accordance with § 90 of the Telecommunications Act (TKG) (Riese 2017).

From this perspective, it cannot be ruled out that smart speakers could become a risk for offline security if, for example, criminals infiltrate a household using such devices and know exactly who is at home and when, among other things.

Viewed from a media-pedagogical point of view, the topic is also challenging for the following reason. Users often do not expect any threat to their privacy in fact when dealing with Alexa and similar assistants because, as Zeng, Mare, and Roesner (2017) pointed out in a study, they often have only a limited technical understanding of smart home technologies. Even if consumers are aware that smart speakers and digital voice assistants collect large amounts of data, a concrete action response (in the form of, for example, "I turn off the assistant when I hold private conversations") is usually not forthcoming. One explanation for this is provided by Lau et al., among others, in their study on the differentiated perception of privacy between users and non-users of smart speakers: According to one of their findings, users often exchange privacy for convenience (Lau, Zimmermann, and Schaub 2018). Mhaidli et al. (2020) describe the willingness of users, "to trade off their privacy for the convenience and benefits provided by these devices" (ibid., 253) as a "privacy calculus" (ibid.).

With regard to the promotion of user competence, it is therefore important to make children aware, in a way that is clear to them, that smart technology can access their private data and that they pay for the services of digital assistants with their personal data. This sensitisation as intended through "Boundary Management" (Leong and Selinger 2019) goes hand in hand with practicing basic security settings, such as "How do I turn off the smart speaker?", but also with rehearsing concrete action strategies for everyday life, such as "I only switch on the assistant when I have a concrete request, then I switch it off again". Ideally, automated actions of self-control are consolidated in the learning process.

5. Interim Conclusion

It is already clear at this point that media-pedagogical concepts urgently need to be developed with a view to promoting user competence among young people. Before we can transfer this knowledge to didactic projects, however, we would like to broaden our analysis: In the course of this article, it has already been shown that the use of smart speakers often comes into contact with advertising. In the following, we would like to show that this is not a coincidence and that a closer look at an advertising interpretation in the context of a media-pedagogical smart speaker analysis allows us to broaden our perspectives and draw beneficial conclusions. As a point of

reference within this framework, we draw on an advertising literacy model, based on the considerations of Baacke et al. (1999) and Schulze (2013) (Haas 2020, 94). Emphasis is placed on the interplay of four dimensions:

- Acquiring structural knowledge about advertising, including trends and types: the *advertising knowledge* dimension.
- Critical, reflective attitude towards advertising: the *advertising criticism/advertising ethics* dimension.
- Safe interaction in everyday life with advertising and consumption: *advertising media use* dimension.
- Becoming an active consumer and producer: *advertising media design* dimension.

Advertising literacy is understood in this context as a continuation of media competence (Baacke et al. 1999, 338). In German-speaking countries, as well as in this article, the concept of media competence is based on the research of Chomsky and Habermas (ibid., 54). As a condition as well as a target concept of learning through media, this media competence approach also emphasises the ability “to make media messages accessible to others and to understand, critically analyse and evaluate media messages appropriately, as well as to design them oneself [...]” (Grafe 2011, 76).¹³

In order for newer forms of advertising to also be adequately analysed from a pedagogical standpoint, it is also necessary to broaden the understanding of advertising (Haas 2020, 91). This expansion of the topic offers a promising degree of added value when it comes to the topic of smart speakers and digital voice assistants since in German-speaking countries, the subject of advertising is usually didactically negotiated exclusively under the aspect of ‘traditional commercial advertising’. In this context, advertising implies that we are concerned with targeted means of communication that are used to draw the attention of potential consumers to goods and services with the aim of making them known or selling them. In fact, this area of advertising literacy promotion is already in demand in terms of educational transfer benefit. However, smart speakers and the advertising mechanisms based on them are, at first glance, difficult to grasp with the characteristics of traditional advertising, partly because the hardware does not cost much and the services available on it are largely free of charge. As with so many seemingly free online services, the true currencies are attention and data.¹⁴

13 For similarities and differences in the pedagogical discussions about the examination of media in German-speaking and Anglo-American countries, see Silke Grafe (2011) and Sonja Ganguin, Gemkow, and Haubold (2020).

14 Smart speakers and the new advertisement mechanisms resulting from them are not only challenging for media pedagogy, which can be seen in this example: The US government is currently planning a far-reaching lawsuit against Google because they claim the company has misused its advertising business dominance. The challenge lies, according to news agency heise online, in the fact that these are «[J]uridical uncharted waters with free services» (Sokolov 2020).

When taking into account an ideological dimension of advertising, however, smart speakers and voice assistants can certainly be understood in the context of traditional advertising:

“Advertising almost always aims to influence people’s behaviour, whether they buy a product, choose a party or visit a museum. Sometimes it is only intended to influence opinions and attitudes that are reflected in a variety of different behaviours (example: advertising for a particular belief)” (Krober-Riel and Esch 2015, 53).

This advertising perspective is not yet adequately taken into account in media literacy education in Germany. However, it is important because it raises awareness for the fact that consumers are permanently confronted with persuasive forms of communication, especially in the digital age (Buijzen, van Reijmersdal, and Owen 2010). This is vividly illustrated by current topics in media education, such as child influencers (Evans, Hoy, and Childers 2018) or ‘fake news’ (including in connection with conspiracy theories). On the one hand, smart speakers and digital voice assistants establish another channel for advertising to children, in the sense of ‘influencing’ them, and in principle anytime and anywhere, even in the children’s bedrooms. On the other hand, this increases the scope as well as the way in which consumers can potentially be influenced in their smart use. As described, the range extends from ‘interactive voice advertising’ to possible influence through skills/actions for commercial or ideological purposes to ‘dishonest anthropomorphism’. However, even the selection process of an organic search result generated from the specific algorithm (performed by the platform processing the search query), can be interpreted in some way as a possible attempt to influence.

Companies with persuasion knowledge about their targets and persuasive processes (following the Persuasion Knowledge Model by Friestad and Wright, 1994) will thus design their homepage in an SEO-optimized way and hence will rank higher in search queries. If an influencer possesses persuasion knowledge about the content and persuasive processes (uses clever choice of words, appealing video structure, etc.), he or she also will achieve a higher organic reach and will therefore also be ranked higher. Even organic search engine results can therefore never be completely neutral, e.g. companies ‘advertise’ for users, their attention and possibly their purchasing power by means of the texts optimised on their pages or channels. In the sense of content marketing, they do not always advertise their brand in a way that is recognisable at first glance, but they still try to stimulate interest in their products or services, or to present themselves well. This can significantly influence, for example, a purchase decision. To this point, a further (pedagogically questionable) feature arises in the context of smart speakers: Users are first presented with only *one* result. Those with advertising skills (see above) will be ‘one step ahead’: It becomes difficult

for users to determine the objectivity of the results. In clear contrast to a search on a desktop computer, whereby a user can choose between hundreds of results and directly compare them to each other, the result from a smart speaker is subject to a high degree of preselection.

As shown in the article, there are also aspects of a media-pedagogical smart speaker analysis in which the reference to ‘pure’ user competence, rather than to advertising literacy, seems more obvious at first glance. However, we are not concerned with a tension, but rather a complementary relationship between media competence and advertising literacy. As Baacke et al. (1999) write:

“If we insert this detailed position of ‘advertising literacy’ into Baacke’s overarching scheme of ‘media competence’ [...], it emerges that [...] media competence and advertising literacy are ‘inseparably’ linked insofar as the specific skills related to advertising messages are performances that constitute a central component of communicative media action. Apart from advertising, it is moreover a matter of otherwise identifying specific media codes (going beyond advertising, extended to genres); of distinguishing the objective information content and additional aesthetic or other analog messages; of being able to assess forms of statement of mass media in the context of market-economy forms of organisation [...]” (ibid., 74).

In light of this interim conclusion, we will elaborate in the following possible media educational approaches to the topic of ‘smart speakers and digital voice assistants’ from the perspective of promoting advertising literacy.

6. Starting Points for Media Education in Dealing with Smart Speakers and Digital Assistants

The advertising media design dimension (see above) explicitly emphasises the producer role of the subjects. Everyone has the opportunity to actively influence and develop the cultural cycle and the associated advertising media system (Haas 2020, 20). In this context, it is a matter of articulating one’s ideas and opinions of the world with the help of media, and doing so in the most creative way possible. With its aesthetic orientation, advertising media design wants to create something new and at the same time promote flexible, ingenious creative processes. In terms of concrete pedagogical work with adolescents, this means that in addition to critical-analytical educational sequences, concrete daily life and topic-oriented approaches and methods are to be implemented (Baacke et al. 1999, 339), such as programming a voice app for a smart speaker (see below). The creative power of advertising media design, which naturally cannot be seen in isolation from the other dimensions, is expressed in different ways depending on the actor.

We would like to refer to three main actors, namely educators, parents and producers of smart technologies, including those in the advertising industry:

Pedagogical actors (1) are faced with the task of designing target group-specific and action-oriented teaching/learning programs for adolescents. Smart speakers are quite complex as an advertising phenomenon due to their new, interactive and subtle possibilities of persuasive communication. The approach to the promotion of advertising literacy represented in this paper is also suitable for digital assistants and smart speakers in (pre-)school and out-of-school learning. The following aspects provide a basis for educational processes:

- a. Focus on individual advertising knowledge with questions such as: *What data does the speech assistant collect and why? What is personalised advertising?*
- b. Focus on advertising criticism/advertising ethics with topics such as *monopolisation when shopping or selective results via digital assistants/dishonest anthropomorphism/gender biases/reflection on one's own (consumption) wishes.*
- c. Focus on advertising media use with, for example, the following content: *How do I switch a microphone on and off in the smart speaker? When does it make sense to continue researching by hand, to compare products and sources and only then to decide which recommendation to follow or which content is useful?*¹⁵
- d. Focus on advertising media design which, under the keyword *empowerment*, encourages learners to become active and creative themselves, e.g. *programming a skill or action for a smart speaker itself within the framework of appropriate guidelines and under pedagogical supervision/having children describe the everyday life of digital voice assistants in a creative writing exercise (also suitable for younger learners).*

A didactic goal is that learners do not perceive themselves in their everyday world as mere consumers, but rather become active themselves and thus perceive themselves as producers of knowledge and can promote what they have created themselves.

For a successful promotion of advertising literacy in the context of smart speakers, it is necessary to take responsibility not only for media educators but also for other agents. Here, the parents (2) should be mentioned first, since they have a decisive influence over the development of their children – when it comes to consumer behaviour as well (Schuhen et al. 2015, 121) and communicative competence (Kudina 2019, 111). Of course, they need support in using smart technologies in a child-friendly manner, in compliance with data protection laws, and in setting up

¹⁵ To enable young people to understand smart speakers and digital assistants as new information systems with all their advantages and disadvantages, they need to actively experience the research of information (hands-on and ears-on). This means that they can understand the differences in the results of several providers, companies and/or information sources. The essential aim is to evoke a learning process which demonstrates these aspects and why it is useful to compare and analyse different sources.

the required precautions. Such sensitisation to the topic of smart speakers including data protection can be achieved, for example, through parent-teacher meetings at schools, information events in public libraries, information brochures and/or workshops.

Media products are not neutral. There are always media makers behind the scenes with their views and interests, for example, when it comes to ideology, economic interests or politics. They influence the construction of their media products (Haas 2015, 92f). Therefore, smart speaker and advertising companies (3) also bear a social responsibility, especially if they offer products and content that young people can and want to consume. Needless to say, the smart speaker technology of the major providers will continue to develop and smaller companies with innovative ideas will also enter the market. For example, Mycroft and Q¹⁶ are positioning themselves as alternatives in the digital assistant market with open source voice recognition, gender-neutral voices and the promise of advertising freedom.¹⁷ A U.S. start-up also developed Chatterbox, a smart speaker that can be assembled and programmed by children starting at primary school age.¹⁸

However, in order to influence the future development of smart technologies on the producer side and to provide young people on the consumer side with the necessary tools for their adequate use, the active participation of educational experts is required. The teaching of advertising literacy skills plays a central role in this. Children are inexperienced consumers. This aspect must not be ignored when producing new technologies and marketing strategies. One of the tasks of media education is therefore to enter into dialogue with the advertising industry and to provide support in order to establish more pedagogical perspectives in economic processes.

7. Conclusion

In addition to all the sensitive points set out here, smart speakers undoubtedly offer numerous opportunities for young people: they can help with homework, promote versatile skills such as language development via pedagogically valuable game applications and interactive stories, and make the daily lives of busy parents (and thus their children) easier. In addition – and this is always an important factor when it comes to children – they are fun. However, there are numerous challenges which arise from using smart speakers and digital voice assistants from a media-pedagogical perspective.

16 Several initiatives produced and provided Q in 2019 in Denmark, the first gender-neutral voice assistant. This project aims to counteract gender stereotypes in business contexts (see <https://www.genderless-voice.com>, last accessed October 21, 2020).

17 “We promise to never sell your data or give you advertisements on our technology” (see <https://mycroft.ai>, last accessed October 21, 2020).

18 The project can be found on the official website (see <https://hellochatterbox.com>, last accessed October 21, 2020).

Advertising is a central component of every culture and, as shown here, its presence is growing. Therefore, children also encounter advertising in various forms in their own world. The promotion of advertising literacy – in the active accompaniment of parents and educators – should therefore begin as early as possible in the child's life. In light of these circumstances, the aim of teaching advertising literacy is also to enable consumers to decode, evaluate and select messages in media texts in a reflective manner, including via smart speakers and language assistants. Advertising literacy here means, on the one hand, consciously deciding for or against an offer – independent of recommendations by a language assistant – and, on the other hand, to be able to search for alternative offers if necessary.

“We are in year zero of the voice revolution”, as Google employee Lionel Mora was already quoted in this paper. The world seems increasingly ‘smarter’, consumption is becoming easier and more casual. At the same time, the permanent, overflowing supply of products and media content with smart technologies is penetrating ever further into the private sphere.

Advertising literacy is a central qualification here, on the one hand, to be able to identify and enjoy suitable offers. On the other hand, it is necessary to recognise the fierce competition of the companies behind the numerous smart speakers and to understand that we pay for the smart service of our voice assistant with much sought-after and expensive currencies: with our attention and our data.

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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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The Visual Self

The Connection between Adolescents' Self-Presentation on Instagram and Their Ability to Recognize and Evaluate Advertising Content

Claudia Riesmeyer , Pauline Sawatzki, and Amelie Hagleitner 

Abstract

This article analyzes adolescents' self-presentation on Instagram, the role influencers might play in such content, and adolescents' advertising literacy, defined as recognizing and evaluating advertising presented by influencers as well as using advertising knowledge. Based on 32 in-depth interviews and think-aloud protocols, this study identifies five types of self-presentation (staged, natural, covert, changed, and two-sided). Influencers were important benchmarks for almost all the adolescents interviewed; the participants each followed one or more influencers on Instagram and were inspired by the advertised products. Furthermore, they recognized influencers' commercial interests and presentation strategies. Their positive or negative evaluations of these strategies were linked to their self-presentation and ranged from approval to rejection. A negative evaluation of advertising did not automatically lead to a rejection of the implied advertising message. A discrepancy between the adolescents' knowledge and actions became clear when they admitted buying advertised products despite being critical of advertising or knowing which advertising mechanisms were being applied.

Das visuelle Ich. Der Zusammenhang zwischen der Selbstdarstellung Heranwachsender auf Instagram und ihrer Fähigkeit, Werbeinhalte zu erkennen und zu bewerten

Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel analysiert die Selbstdarstellung Heranwachsender auf Instagram, die Rolle, die Influencer bei der Selbstdarstellung Heranwachsender spielen, und ihre Werbekompetenz, definiert als die Fähigkeit, die von Influencern präsentierte Werbung zu erkennen und zu bewerten. Auf der Grundlage von 32 Leitfadeninterviews und Think-Aloud-Protokollen identifiziert die Studie fünf Arten der Selbstdarstellung (inszenierte, natürliche, verdeckte, veränderte und zweiseitige Selbstdarstellung). Für fast alle befragten Heranwachsenden waren Influencer ein wichtiger Massstab und Orientierung: Sie folgten einem oder sogar mehreren Influencern auf Instagram und liessen sich von den beworbenen Produkten inspirieren. Darüber hinaus erkannten die Heranwachsenden das kommerzielle Interesse

und die Präsentationsstrategien von Influencern. Die positive oder negative Bewertung dieser Strategien war mit ihrer Selbstdarstellung verbunden und reichte von Ablehnung bis Zustimmung, wobei eine negative Bewertung der Werbung nicht automatisch zu einer Ablehnung der implizierten Werbebotschaft führte. Eine Diskrepanz zwischen dem Wissen der Heranwachsenden und ihrem Handeln wird deutlich, denn selbst wenn sie der Werbung kritisch gegenüberstanden oder wussten, welche Werbemechanismen verfolgt wurden, gaben sie zu, die von Influencern beworbene Produkte zu kaufen.

1. Introduction

Instagram is the most popular social network site among German adolescents aged between 12 and 19 years old. Of these, 64 percent use it regularly, while 52 percent use it daily and follow an average of 282 individual or organizational accounts (Feierabend et al. 2020, 31). Instagram has become an important social network site for identity performance (Boyd 2014) because adolescents can present themselves by posting pictures, following other accounts, and liking posts (Chua and Chang 2016; Dumas et al. 2017; Lee et al. 2015; Sheldon and Bryant 2016). Identity formation is a central development task in adolescence (Erikson 1959, 1968), and Instagram is thus a place to experiment with one's own identity and try out different ways of presenting it. For this self-presentation, social reference points and referent others are important. Initial studies have shown that peers act as role models for adolescents (Chua and Chang 2016; Yau and Reich 2018) and that parents set basic rules for using social network sites and communicate them to their children (Hudders and Cauberghe 2018; Livingstone and Helsper 2008).

However, Instagram is not only used for private communication but also by public figures and organizations pursuing commercial interests with their accounts.

“Instagram is the platform that is most used by opinion leaders (influencers), due to the sense of immediacy that is generated and because of its creation of communities” (Casalóa, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2018, 1).

Influencers often use professional and staged self-presentation to increase their number of followers and thus their opportunities for financial gain. Because of adolescents' intensive use of Instagram and the important role it plays for them, influencers can become new members of their networks (Geber and Hefner 2019) and may provide an orientation for adolescents' self-presentation (von Rotz and Tokarski 2020) because their self-presentation as an expression of their identity formation is “influenced by settings and the people in those settings” (Yau and Reich 2018, 197; Maccoby 1980). However, the role that influencers play in adolescents' self-presentation has hardly been investigated to date.

Furthermore, adolescents need advertising literacy (Rozendaal et al. 2011), which develops in childhood and adolescence (Friestad and Wright 1994; Roedder John 1999; Rozendaal, Buijzen, and Valkenburg 2011) and is defined as conceptual and attitudinal advertising literacy as well as advertising literacy performance (knowledge, evaluation, and the retrieval of knowledge; Rozendaal et al. 2011). Since the self-presentation and general profile aesthetic of many influencers is characterized by sponsored content, recognition and the ability to distinguish paid and organic activities might add another layer to the conception of advertising literacy. However, advertising literacy enables adolescents

- to recognize advertising content (the identification of said paid content among that which is organic) and influencers' self-presentation as a possibly staged and commercial-interest-driven activity (influencers' Instagram use not only for self-but also for brand marketing);
- to critically evaluate advertising content, influencers' self-presentation, and their commercial and persuasive interests; and
- to act according to their knowledge (knowledge transfer into action as regards one's own self-presentation as well as the orientation of their consumer decisions based on the influencers' recommendations).

An assumption could be that the more advertising-literate adolescents are, the more likely they are to recognize and evaluate influencers' self-presentation on Instagram as described above, on the one hand, and the advertised product, on the other hand, and to question and adapt their own self-presentation and consumer behavior accordingly. However, to our knowledge, studies that examine this assumption are seldom.

This article analyzes the link between adolescents' self-presentation on Instagram, the role influencers might play in such content (e.g., as role models), and the adolescents' advertising literacy in terms of their ability to recognize and evaluate influencers' self-presentation in general and advertising content within this self-presentation on Instagram and to act according to their advertising knowledge. Based on 32 in-depth interviews and think-aloud protocols with 14–17-year-old adolescents, the study emphasizes the importance of advertising literacy for the recognition and evaluation of advertising messages, on the one hand, and adolescents' (influenced) self-presentation, on the other.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 *Adolescents' Self-Presentation on Instagram*

Self-presentation refers to the process through which individuals attempt to control the impressions that others form of them (Leary and Kowalski 1990). Since the impressions that people make regarding others influence how others perceive, evaluate, and treat them, people are interested in creating an impression that serves their interests (Goffman 1990; Leary and Kowalski 1990). This impression does not necessarily have to be positive but must at least be in line with their objectives. Instagram offers adolescents the possibility to present themselves and form their own identities (Chua and Chang 2016). This self-presentation is influenced by both the individual's goals and possibilities (Leary and Kowalski 1990) and the audience's characteristics (Rui and Stefanone 2013). Thus, self-presentation always occurs in a specific social context that is influenced by the expectations of referent others, for example, peers or influencers who also strive to create a certain image of themselves online.

Instagram as a social networking site has a graphic, image-based character (Grieve 2017; Sheldon and Bryant 2016). The visual characteristics of this social network predetermine adolescents' self-presentation (Dumas et al. 2017; Lee et al. 2015). Instagram provides adolescents with a platform to present themselves through posting pictures, following other accounts, and liking other posts (Chua and Chang 2016; Dumas et al. 2017; Lee et al. 2015; Sheldon and Bryant 2016). Therefore, Instagram is a place for them to perform and to experiment with their own identities (Boyd 2014) and to try out different ways of presenting them (Lup, Trub, and Rosenthal 2015; Sheldon and Bryant 2016).

Initial studies have shown that adolescents always try to show themselves in a positive way on Instagram, as desired by referent others (e.g., Siibak 2009). According to Yau and Reich (2018, 201), adolescents' self-presentation is based on three peer expectations regarding the need to appear to be interesting (e.g., showing no negative moments of one's life), likeable (e.g., receiving likes for one's published content), and attractive (e.g., looking good). While adolescents generally orient themselves toward these expectations, Yau and Reich (2018) also found evidence that they actively distance themselves from others to some extent, for example, by creating a second account on Instagram to share very personal pictures with only a small circle of friends. This form of self-presentation may also be due to a possible discrepancy between one's own expectations and those of referent others, which may nonetheless converge over time (Chua and Chang 2016). RQ 1 examines what form of self-presentation is actually chosen by adolescents:

RQ 1: How do adolescents reflect on their self-presentation on Instagram?

2.2 *Influencers and Their Commercial Interests*

Influencers are social network site users with a wide reach and expertise in their field (de Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson 2019). They are considered “inspirational experts”(Sundermann and Raabe 2019, 279) and “trusted advisors” (Scheunert et al. 2018, 75; own translation) with an identification value (von Rotz and Tokarski 2020). They have a close relationship with their followers (e.g., adolescents; Enke and Borchers 2018) and create an “illusion of a face to face relationship” (von Rotz and Tokarski 2020, 427).

“Many organizations have identified social media influencers (SMIs) as relevant intermediaries, most notably because they provide access to and might even influence hard-to-reach stakeholders, e.g., teenage and young adult consumers” (Enke and Borchers 2019a, 261; see also Borchers 2019).

Influencers are online opinion leaders, defined as individuals with an influence on others’ decision making and behaviors (Casalóa, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2018; Godey et al. 2016; Rogers and Cartano 1962). In the context of influencer marketing, these individuals are sought out by companies or nonprofit organizations (NPOs) to increase the reach of their products or to attract more attention to the companies or NPOs in general (Enke and Borchers 2018; Krömer, Borchers, and Enke 2018; Lou and Yuan 2019). They have different roles, such as content creators, multipliers, moderators, and protagonists, and act in their clients’ interests (Enke and Borchers 2019a, 265). Influencers recommend products, services, or companies and specify what is good or bad, updated or outdated. For these recommendations, they often use a self-presentation as natural as possible (Wellman et al. 2020). Furthermore, they pursue a commercial interest, on the one hand, and want to (further) increase their own reach, on the other (Casalóa, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2018). In order to achieve these goals, they pursue a target-group-oriented approach and create self-presentation based on the expectations of the target group (e.g., adolescents) and the advertising partner (von Rotz and Tokarski 2020).

This form of marketing uses influencers as testimonials. They show commercials with themselves on their Instagram profiles in order to post paid advertising messages and recommend products. Although advertising messages should be labeled as such (e.g., commitment to disclosure; Enke and Borchers 2019b), this is not always the case since the casual showing, mentioning, or favoring of products or brands in their posts can also have an influential persuasive effect. Cathy Hummels, one wide-reaching and popular influencer among adolescents in Germany, obtained the right to waive the labeling of advertising in front of a court in 2020 (Handel 2020). However, the jurisdiction in Germany is currently as unclear in this regard (when it must be labeled or not) as to the question of where advertising begins (e.g. Brecht 2019). In other cases, influencers were obliged to identify all advertising posts as such. Pamela

Reif lost a court case in 2020 and is required to continue labeling all her advertisements on Instagram (Kranich 2020). A glance at her profile, on which she advertises underwear and sportswear, for example, shows that she does not always implement this. In this case, the persuasive communication intention is not apparent at first glance (Scheunert et al. 2018), which may make it difficult to distinguish between advertising and content due to the authentic presentation and casual mentioning of the products. Consequently, Instagram's appeal for advertisers is not surprising; it offers them the opportunity to reach adolescents as young consumers in an environment where they are heavily involved. Additionally, the advertising, disguised as product recommendations, comes from someone who adolescents know, trust, and admire to a certain extent (de Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson 2019).

Adolescents orient their self-presentation toward the expectations of referent others, who could also be role models for this content (von Rotz and Tokarski 2020; Yau and Reich 2018). So far, research has focused primarily on groups close to adolescents, such as parents or friends (Arnett 2007; Clark 2011; Hurrelmann and Bauer 2018; Nimrod, Elias, and Lemish 2019; Roedder John 1999; Yau and Reich 2018), or on the link between influencer content and brand expectations (de Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson 2019). If adolescents actively follow influencers' accounts on Instagram, then it is likely that influencers could also be benchmarks for the youths' self-presentation (de Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson 2019; Geber and Hefner 2019; van Dam and van Reijmersdal 2019). RQ 2 addresses this assumption:

RQ 2: Do adolescents use influencers as benchmarks for their self-presentation on Instagram?

2.3 Advertising Literacy

"Advertising literacy is generally defined as conceptual knowledge of advertising" (Rozendaal et al. 2011, 335). Following this definition, a person is advertising literate if he or she is able to recognize advertising and its source, as well as understand the target audience, advertising's selling and persuasive intent and tactics, and finally, advertising's bias (Rozendaal et al. 2011, 335). However, Rozendaal et al. (2011) emphasize that knowledge alone does not distinguish advertising literacy and that the use of knowledge and attitude is also a relevant component. They therefore propose a tripartite division of "advertising-related knowledge" (conceptual advertising literacy), the "actual use of advertising knowledge while being exposed to advertising" (advertising literacy performance), and "attitudinal advertising literacy" (Rozendaal et al. 2011, 344). The first dimension addresses the perception of advertising and understanding as the cognitive component (Huders, Cauberghe, and Panic 2016; Kröger 2018), dimension two focuses on the application of knowledge, and dimension three

highlights the attitude toward advertising (Rozendaal et al. 2011, 346; Rozendaal, Opre, and Buijzen 2016, 74). The latter two dimensions cover affective components of advertising literacy (Hudders, Cauberghe, and Panic 2016). Affective advertising literacy manifests itself if “negative feelings of dislike and disbelief are aroused upon confrontation with advertising” (Hudders, Cauberghe, and Panic 2016, 910; Rozendaal, Opre, and Buijzen 2016).

Following this tripartite conceptualization of advertising literacy (Rozendaal et al. 2011), Hudders et al. (2017, 335) differentiate between dispositional and situational advertising literacy, and thus the recognition of advertising, as well as moral and affective abilities. Situational advertising literacy concentrates on the situational application of dispositional skills and the critical reflection of the perceived advertising message and should trigger one’s own dispositional skills. This distinction between dispositional and situational skills helps to explain possible differences with regard to knowledge, evaluation, and use because advertising literacy requires the ability not only to recognize advertising but also to evaluate and to act according to that knowledge (Hudders and Cauberghe 2018; Rozendaal et al. 2011; Rozendaal, Opre, and Buijzen 2016).

By considering the use of and attitude toward advertising content, the definition of advertising literacy “becomes more in line with the original meaning of the term literacy, which encompasses more than just the ability to identify and understand messages” (Rozendaal et al. 2011, 345), and similarities to the media literacy definition become apparent. Media literacy consists of knowledge, evaluation, and action (Pfaff-Rüdiger and Riesmeyer 2016; Schorb 2005). An adolescent is considered advertising literate if he or she recognizes advertising messages (a knowledge of advertising, Instagram commercial characteristics, the identification of paid content among that of an organic nature, and influencers’ self-presentation as a possibly staged and commercial-interest-driven activity; cognitive dimension), evaluates them (positive, neutral, or negative evaluation as a critical reflection of the consumed content and the perception of influencers’ self-presentation; attitudinal dimension), and uses this knowledge and evaluation when confronted with advertising content (acting upon one’s own self-presentation; adaptation of one’s consumer behavior; performance dimension); as a result, these dimensions are closely linked to one another and sometimes overlap (Pfaff-Rüdiger and Riesmeyer 2016).

Previous studies have shown that advertising literacy develops in childhood and adolescence and is influenced by the social environment and parental mediation strategies (e.g., de Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson 2019; Friestad and Wright 1994; Hudders et al. 2017; Kröger 2018; Lou, Kim, and Xie 2020; Riesmeyer, Abel, and Großmann 2019; Roedder John 1999; Rozendaal, Buijzen, and Valkenburg 2011). Although there are some studies linking hybrid advertising to recognition, persuasion, and purchase intention among adolescents (de Jans and Cauberghe 2018; van Reijmersal

and Boerman 2016; Verhellen and Dens 2014), a more in-depth extension of this concept toward influencers is needed as they build a bridge between entertainment and advertising. Furthermore, identity formation is a central development task in adolescence (Erikson 1959, 1968), within which Instagram is a place to experiment with one's own identity and try out different ways of presenting it. The identity formation process occurs in different social settings and is influenced by relevant others (Maccoby 1980; Yau and Reich 2018), for example, influencers. They can be role models for adolescents' self-presentation (von Rotz and Tokarski 2020). To date, only a few studies have focused on social media influencers (de Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson 2018) and adolescents at the reflective stage (11–16 years old; Roedder John 1999). RQ 3 therefore emphasizes adolescents' advertising literacy and examines the extent to which they are able to perceive and evaluate influencers' advertising content and self-presentation:

RQ 3: Are adolescents able to recognize influencers' advertising content and self-presentation, evaluate them, and act according to their own advertising knowledge?

3. Method

To answer these RQs, a qualitative research design was chosen because it is often difficult for adolescents to express themselves regarding complex perceptions or to gauge approval or rejection. Due to its openness, a qualitative approach offers them more time and space to reflect on perceptions and actions. Furthermore, this methodological design was selected because it is well-suited to examining mindsets, opinions, and behaviors (Creswell 2007; Flick 2018; Kvale and Brinkman 2009; Mason 2018). Therefore, in-depth interviews were combined with think-aloud protocols to encourage adolescents to speak about their self-presentation, that of influencers, and their own advertising literacy.

Interview guide. The development of the interview guide was based on the theoretical assumptions described above and consisted of four sections:

- *Everyday life:* characteristics of everyday life, social media use in general, Instagram use in particular (e.g., duration, importance in everyday life, numbers and kinds of followers)
- *Knowledge and reflection on self-presentation:* background knowledge about posting on Instagram (e.g., image processing, publication time, range, hashtags), the classification and evaluation of viewed content, the characterization of adolescents' self-presentation (rules, their publishing strategies, their orientation toward others, e.g., influencers, peers)

- *Followed influencers*: the characterization of the accounts they followed (e.g., kinds of accounts, such as sports, music, arts; reasons for following these accounts), influence on their consumer behavior
- *Advertising literacy*: knowledge and evaluation of advertising on Instagram (e.g., the perception and appraisal of such content), the use of knowledge (action, orientation toward influencers, the adaptation of consumer behavior)

Based on the four sections, nineteen main questions (and up to four follow-up questions) were developed. The interview guide was used flexibly. If answers to a specific follow-up question had already been given, the question was omitted.

Think-aloud. To encourage adolescents to articulate their advertising literacy, their ideas regarding the presentations, and their perceptions of influencers, a primary task was integrated into the interviews. The adolescents were shown the Instagram account of ‘matiamubysofia’, a female German model and influencer. Her account was chosen because of her reach (about 526k followers in September 2020); her thematic content, which is closely related to adolescents’ everyday lives (e.g., beauty, sports, lifestyle; de Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson 2019); and her function as an inspiration and role model among adolescents (von Rotz and Tokarski 2020). Adolescents’ presumed acceptance and positive, neutral, or negative evaluations were tested in the first phase of the interviews through the think-aloud approach, which consisted of two steps. First, the adolescents were asked to look at the profile and describe their impressions in general. They were then presented with a post with advertising content (as advertising labeled as product placement for a perfume implemented in a post for Mother’s Day) and were asked to speak freely and without any instructions about what they saw, whether they recognized the post’s commercial interests, and how they evaluated it overall. This method has the advantage of making the participants react specifically to what is shown, depending on the situation, thus creating a real-life scenario, which eliminates unwanted distortion effects (Bilandzic 2017). Through think-aloud protocol, this study gained detailed insights into adolescents’ perceptions and evaluation processes with regard to Instagram usage.

Sample. In total, 32 interviews with adolescents were conducted during the summer of 2018. They were recruited through a purposive-sampling approach to cover as broad a spectrum of sociodemographic backgrounds as possible (age, gender, and school type; Lindlof and Taylor 2011; Ritchie et al. 2014). While this selection strategy worked very well in terms of the type of school (50 percent lower secondary school and secondary school, 50 percent grammar school) and age (14 years old: 6 adolescents, 15 years old: 10 adolescents, 16 years old: 11 adolescents, 17 years old: 5 adolescents; $M = 15.5$), it was not possible to achieve an equal distribution of gender. The interviewees consisted of 11 boys and 21 girls. All adolescents came from Munich or neighborhood communities; they were interviewed in their social environments (e.g., at home, at school).

Interviews. Under a research project at LMU Munich, this study's authors conducted audio-recorded, face-to-face interviews together with 14 bachelor's degree students; these interviews were subsequently transcribed and anonymized to protect the adolescents' privacy. Before the interviews, the adolescents and their parents gave written consent. The interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes each (21–65 minutes).

Analysis. All the interviews were independently analyzed by the authors using qualitative content analysis (Flick 2018). Thereby, a theory-driven approach was used. First, all the transcripts were read several times, and relevant interview excerpts were assigned to the categories of everyday life (i. e., typical Instagram use), knowledge and reflection on self-presentation (i. e., kinds of and typical characteristics of their own self-presentation via Instagram), followed or admired influencers (i. e., influencers' functions, such as role models, inspirations), and advertising literacy (i. e., knowledge about Instagram as a platform for pursuing commercial and persuasive interests, the recognition of advertising labeling, the evaluation of influencers' self-presentation, the application of knowledge). Based on these categories, line-by-line coding of each transcript was conducted, and the codes were organized into a table with which direct comparisons of extracted aspects could be made to identify common topics, similarities, and differences among the adolescents in terms of categories. Afterward, the codes were condensed and generalized to extract their central meanings and, in the course of this, five types of adolescents' self-presentation on Instagram, which differed regarding their perception of influencers and their advertising literacy, were identified.

4. Results

4.1 *Adolescents' Self-Presentation on Instagram*

Regarding the self-presentation of the 32 adolescents, two positions became clear: they stressed the protection of their privacy and the limits of self-presentation on Instagram. They did not show their private and intimate moments. Many of the adolescents explained that they did not post images that were too personal or revealing, let alone nude images. Bikini pictures were rarely shown and if so, on accounts to which only close friends had access. Only Paula (aged 17) had no qualms about showing a little more skin on her public account "because you wear a bikini to be seen". The majority of the adolescents did not want to show photos that could be problematic later when looking for a job. This attitude was based on their knowledge that the internet forgets nothing:

“It’s just such a big deal, really. It’s not only on Instagram, but it’s everywhere when you upload it. Anyone can see it. If I want to get a job, I should not post party pictures now because they will be there forever” (Nils, aged 16).

The adolescents mostly posted photos with friends, from their vacations, and of memorable moments. They rarely mentioned selfies and were more likely to be seen in photos that others had taken. Despite these similarities, the form of adolescents’ self-presentation varied greatly and was manifest in five types.

Type 1: Staged Self-Presentation

Eight adolescents (six girls, two boys) primarily valued the perfect online staging of themselves. They focused on aesthetics for the sole purpose of “looking good” (Bastian, aged 16). It was important to them to put themselves in the limelight and show only their most attractive side – even if it did not correspond with reality or showed only part of it. This form of self-presentation was complex. All adolescents in this group posed to take particularly beautiful pictures and edited them afterwards to show perfectly staged impressions of their own lives. The editing sometimes went beyond the optimization of colors. For example, Paula (aged 17) used an app with which she could retouch photos. To take the perfect picture, they sometimes went to great lengths, such as organizing photo shoots with friends (e.g., Bastian, aged 16) or integrating these shoots into other social gatherings (e.g., Cora, aged 15). Only some photos were taken spontaneously, but even those were not free from ulterior motives, and the adolescents consciously tried to put themselves in the limelight (e.g., Rita, aged 16). First, the subject for Instagram was chosen, and then the photo was taken:

“When you go on a city trip, you go to a popular, beautiful place, so you can take a nice picture there and post it. Sometimes they are snapshots, but I think overall, they are more often posed pictures” (Hannah, aged 16).

It was noticeable that the adolescents belonging to this type identified their profiles as being close to reality, even if they talked about staged self-presentation at the same time, which highlighted a discrepancy between their knowledge and actions.

“The picture should actually reflect reality. But when you take photos, you say ‘now stand like this’ or ‘now laugh like this’. It’s always a bit of a pose. But basically, it’s true to reality” (Hannah, aged 16).

However, others were more aware of the staging. They knew that a photo could provoke negative reactions from others, and they wanted to avoid these sanctions by staging their self-presentation.

The adolescents belonging to this type either had a public or a private account where they accepted people whom they did not know. The goal of presenting themselves in front of a broader and anonymous public seemed to explain the effort put into creating and editing the pictures. Among the adolescents, there were both insecure and self-confident boys and girls. This form of self-expression was attractive for both groups because those who lacked self-assurance could create pictures that lived up to their self-expectations through image editing and good poses. Combined with likes and positive comments, this, in turn, could boost self-confidence without the need for direct interactions with other people. This form of self-expression also offered confident adolescents the opportunity to show themselves in ways that corresponded with their own imaginations or came very close to their desires.

Type 2: Natural, authentic self-presentation

The thirteen adolescents (eight girls, five boys) in the type-2 group were a contrast to those in the type-1 group. They preferred authentic and aesthetically appealing self-presentation:

“It should not be unreal and not be posed that way. The picture should have something to do with me, but I don’t want to post pictures in which I look totally ugly” (Anja, aged 17).

This quote illustrates the demands of self-expression of this type. For these adolescents, it was important to not pretend and instead to post photos that were close to their own realities in order to achieve a certain degree of authenticity. At the same time, this type expressed the desire to feel comfortable with their self-presentation on Instagram. It was interesting to see how the aesthetically authentic individuals justified their desire to reflect reality; for Franziska (aged 15), it seemed natural to remain true to herself – even online. Anton (aged 16) explained that his followers knew him and how he acted in real life. Adjusting his personality or changing his appearance therefore seemed senseless.

Their claims in terms of natural, authentic self-presentation also became clear in regard to their selection of images and posting behavior. The adolescents belonging to this type hardly or never edited their images. If they did, they usually used filters or editing options provided by Instagram itself, but in contrast to the type-1 group, they did not use special editing programs. For example, colors or contrasts were changed to improve the image quality but not to change their own appearance. Noticeably, the adolescents of this type, as opposed to those in the type-1 group, did not take pictures specifically for Instagram. These pictures mostly already existed and were then selected and published:

“I’ll look at the pictures afterwards, but I do not plan when and how to take a picture for Instagram” (Klara, aged 16).

All adolescents belonging to this type had private accounts. It was important for them to be able to control who saw the pictures. They appeared self-confident and partly perceived themselves as such: “I am not shy, not at all” (Anja, aged 17). A connection to self-expression can be drawn; it requires a certain degree of self-confidence to accept one’s identity and share it with others on Instagram. Potential uncertainties seemed to be compensated for by the fact that the adolescents chose pictures they felt most comfortable with. Instagram per se had little value for this type. This finding was reflected in their Instagram use. With two exceptions, the adolescents indicated that they rarely posted anything or had long intervals between posts; instead, they mostly looked at other people’s pictures, only occasionally liking or sharing content.

Type 3: Covert self-presentation

The type-3 group consisted of two girls who uploaded pictures but were careful not to show their faces despite their private profiles. Privacy concerns were central for both girls. Consequently, they reflected on how to show themselves online and opted for private but natural self-presentation. However, showing their faces made them uncomfortable. For example, Nina (aged 14) showed herself in a way that “you can see me from behind or from the side”. The two girls also followed what others posted but seldom posted their own pictures. Nina’s Instagram user motivation was striking; she did so because it was normal in her circle of friends and had been set as a rule. She had succumbed to the perceived peer pressure to have an Instagram account:

“Everybody always said how great it was and that it was the latest trend. I found it stupid that everyone laughed at me because I didn’t have Instagram. I didn’t really want to download it, but then I did it because everybody has it” (Nina, aged 14).

Type 4: Changed self-presentation

Two boys changed their self-presentation (type 4).

“In the past, I posted a lot, but a year ago, I deleted everything, and now I honestly only use Instagram to stalk other people” (Gustav, aged 16).

He and Carsten (aged 15) had begun using Instagram to observe and keep in touch with their friends. Their earlier self-presentation corresponded more with the type-1 group and was characterized by staging. The changes could be explained by the two boys’ development during adolescence and thus the developmental tasks to be fulfilled. Carsten indicated that he no longer liked his previous pictures because his appearance and thus his self-perception had changed.

“Back then, I was a bit fat. Therefore, I deleted them. But at some point, I will be back and more active than today” (Carsten, aged 15).

His insecurity about his appearance and its effect on others led to his changed self-presentation – in this case, a much more passive one than before. Gustav found it difficult to express why he had changed his self-presentation. He believed that over time, his tastes and thus his ideas regarding successful and appropriate self-presentation had changed.

Type 5: Two-sided self-presentation

The two-sided self-presentation group (type 5) corresponded to a combination of the previous variants. In this type, five girls and two boys each had two or more accounts on Instagram. They managed these accounts alone or together with friends to satisfy their need for self-expression. They had chosen a private account for unadulterated, natural self-presentation, which corresponded with that of the type-2 group. For example, on her private account, Mia (aged 15) posted “trash pictures”, which only her close friends were allowed to see. More pictures were usually posted on this account than on her second, public account. For this reason, adolescents called the private account a “spam account” (Lilli, aged 14). Thus, not only did the mode of self-expression vary but also the content and the circle of recipients.

“In the ‘private, private [account],’ I post more things or even funny things with friends, grimaces, or intimate things” (Diana, aged 15).

However, some adolescents also said that with this private profile, they were pursuing not only authentic but also aesthetic aspirations. Perhaps they had internalized Instagram’s perceived logic of showing themselves to be as perfect as possible and could not discard this idea in their supposedly natural self-presentation.

In addition to their private accounts, they presented themselves in a (more) staged manner on their public accounts (corresponding with the type-1 group), where the photos were edited without exception. At the same time, the photos were specially created with the aim of publishing them. In some cases, photo shoots among friends were organized for this purpose.

“I have a public [profile] for sport. There are a lot of people following me who I don’t even know. And that bothered me a bit sometimes because I couldn’t post everything I wanted to. I didn’t want everyone to see it. So, I have another one [a profile] where I only follow people that I know. And there, I post all kinds of things from my normal life. The other one is to present your best side.” (Nils, aged 16).

Influences of age, gender, and school type

Neither age (with two exceptions), gender, nor school type influenced which form of self-presentation adolescents chose. Due to the sample composition, the interviewed boys and girls had a small age range (14–17 years). Staged, natural-authentic

self-presenters, and adolescents with two profiles can be found within the entire age range. Only types 3 and 4 (both with smaller populations) did not adhere to this pattern: the adolescents were of the same age or differed by only one year. This also applied to gender: types 1, 2, and 5 included both boys and girls, while type 3 comprised only girls, and type 4 consisted of only boys. These findings may be explained by the fact that the insecure girls (type 3) opted for an active but covert variant of self-presentation, which was based less on their bodies than on memorable moments in their lives. The boys (type 4) compensated for their perceived insecurity by changing their self-presentation. Moreover, all types of schools were included in all five types in equal parts, so formal education had no influence on how the adolescents presented themselves on Instagram.

However, types 4 and 5 demonstrated the importance of the developmental stage in terms of self-presentation. If their self-perceptions changed during the course of identity formation as a developmental task (Havighurst 1972; Hurrelmann 1990; Hurrelmann and Bauer 2018), then they either changed their profiles (type 4) to show as little of themselves as possible or each used two profiles to create a space where they could present themselves and conform with potential expectations. These expectations that they set for themselves were influenced by referent others, such as peers. The fact that peers were relevant to self-presentation became clear in types 3 and 5. Peers set the use of Instagram as a rule (type 3) and were so important for self-presentation that accounts were shared with them in order to find a place for natural, non-staged self-presentation (type 5). Only these friends could see how the adolescents perceived and wanted to show themselves.

4.2 Influencers – Benchmarks for Adolescent Self-Presentation

RQ 2 focused on influencers' impact on adolescents' self-presentation. Influencers were important benchmarks for almost all the interviewed adolescents, all of whom followed one or more influencers on Instagram and were inspired by their self-presentation. Their self-marketing strategies seemed to appeal to the majority of the interviewed adolescents. They followed accounts that posted pictures concerning various topics related to their everyday lives and interests, such as sports, entertainment, and lifestyle; were aware of certain trends on Instagram set by influencers; and had the appropriate background knowledge regarding special poses, selfies, and hashtags, as well as captions, to identify and evaluate influencers' posting behavior. The adolescents were able to name variants of image processing, which influencers use to present themselves in a correspondingly positive, authentic light, even if they did not use them (especially type 2).

Besides these commonalities, there were differences among the above-mentioned types with regard to their evaluation of influencers' self-presentation and their orientations toward the perceived self-presentation of influencers. The adolescents' evaluations were strongly influenced by their personal tastes. In particular, the type-2 group (natural, authentic self-presentation) criticized the influencers' presentations as being too placed, too strongly processed, and too associated with personal moments. Gloria (aged 17) summed up this criticism of the non-authentic, "posed" pictures as follows:

"Sometimes, I think 'this is already very staged'. Staged pictures that should look nonstaged" (Gloria, aged 17).

This type argued that influencers combined their personal moments with advertising messages (e.g., as shown in the primary task when posting a picture for Mother's Day and advertising perfume at the same time).

"She mixes something personal with product placement, which can be done, but it doesn't have to be. It is just somehow deceitful" (Jonas, aged 16).

Within a broader outlook, this indicates a high awareness of not only influencers' self-presentation but also commercial intent and thus can be interpreted as being advertising literate. Furthermore, it became clear that the type-2 group set the standard of authenticity not only for themselves but also for others. They attached importance to the fact that pictures should not be distorted but instead be as realistic as possible. For example, Anton (aged 16) explained that he only liked influencers who seemed real to him. Accordingly, it would seem logical that these adolescents show a critical attitude toward influencers. It is important for influencers' credibility that they present themselves realistically. This could then lead to a more positive assessment by type-2 adolescents. Influencers were not role models for these adolescents' own self-presentation. Although they followed certain influencers, they used this as a way to see behind the scenes because they were interested in the influencers' personal lives and wanted to take part in these.

The assessment of the adolescents who staged themselves on Instagram (type 1) revealed them to be mirror images of those in the type-2 group. They rated influencers much more positively and oriented themselves toward the influencers and their presentations. This adolescent type attributed an exemplary function to influencers by creating a feeling of closeness. These adolescents openly admitted their attempts to copy the influencers' behavior and self-presentation.

"They affect me. Not my behavior directly, but my lifestyle. I find them just cool and try to copy them. Not in the extreme sense but so that you can see that these people influence me" (Bastian, aged 16).

Many adolescents praised the pictures above all for being beautiful and of a high quality. What the type-2 group was rather reluctant to do seemed to please type-1 adolescents, who accepted the staging and partial deviation from reality, as their focus was ultimately on the aesthetics of the pictures. Thus, the strong image editing was rarely criticized as this was a strategy that they used themselves and adopted from influencers for their own self-presentation.

“That doesn’t really bother me. I think it’s cool if you have a nice picture and if the picture looks even nicer because of image editing. It is positive because then, I have something nice to look at” (Bastian, aged 16).

Again, the adolescents are able to identify certain strategies and utilize them for themselves.

The adolescents who regarded the protection of their privacy as important (type 3) had a negative opinion about influencers, who were not considered to be role models by this type. Therefore, the two girls belonging to this type did not orient their self-presentation toward that of the influencers. This was possibly related to their cautious stance regarding Instagram. In contrast, those who had changed their Instagram use (type 4) held a more positive opinion about influencers. They even oriented themselves toward influencers. This is particularly interesting, given that their previous Instagram profiles (before they deleted all the images) were more in keeping with the self-presentation of those belonging to type 1, who preferred a more positive staging of the self and evaluated influencers. Although their self-presentation had changed, they remained true to their attitude toward influencers.

Finally, the adolescents with two Instagram accounts (type 5) were ambiguous in their assessment, which nonetheless seemed to be consistent with their different claims regarding self-expression and corresponded to their self-presentation. Their assessment depended on which form of presentation was more important to them: the staging (more positive assessment) or authenticity (more negative assessment). However, this case largely confirmed the observation that those who perceived influencers as role models and as being likeable were generally more positive toward them than those who did not feel any sympathy, observe similarities, or accept the influencers’ role model function. Correspondingly, depending on the profile where they published a picture, they oriented themselves more or less strongly toward influencers’ self-presentation.

4.3 Advertising Literacy

RQ 3 focused on the adolescents’ advertising literacy and thus their ability to recognize and evaluate the advertising content presented on the influencers’ Instagram accounts as well as to use this knowledge for their own self-presentation. These

results are strongly intertwined with the perception of influencers' self-presentation (chapter 4.2), because the relevance adolescents attributed to influencers regarding their own self-presentation depended on their evaluation of influencers' self-presentation in general. In other words, the ability and willingness to identify influencers' self-presentation (organic and commercial) and its evaluation seem to be linked with the adolescents' own self-presentation. With one exception, they recognized the advertising character of the presented primary task, were able to classify it as a paid product placement, and mentioned that influencers pursued a commercial interest. Only Rosa (aged 15) could not recognize the advertising background of the primary task, even after being given a hint. Instead, she thought that the post was a personal, non-commercial recommendation. All the others were not guided by the style of the post, but referred spontaneously and without specific guidance to its advertising character and recognized the post's advertising label although the product placement was included in a, in terms of her channel feed, natural looking picture and with a fairly emotional caption about Mother's Day. They knew about the commercial mechanisms Instagram is based on and its function as not just a social network site (e.g., to enable interactions with friends) but also as a platform that displays advertising and that influencers use to generate income. Knowledge of advertising on Instagram as well as its characteristics seemed pronounced among all the adolescents interviewed. They were capable of identifying the persuasive and commercial intent within the presented content and had mastered the cognitive dimension of advertising literacy.

As described in section 2.3, advertising literacy also consists of the evaluation of advertising content (and influencers' self-presentation; attitudinal dimension). The interviewed adolescents possessed this dimension of advertising literacy. They were able to articulate a reflective assessment of the primary task and also justify it. They judged the presented influencer and her content, as well as the product placement, both positively and negatively. The evaluation made in each case was predominantly in line with the adolescents' self-presentation and their demands and requirements regarding their own and influencers' self-presentation on Instagram – for example, type-1 and type-4 self-presenters expect an aesthetically pleasing, professional looking feed and evaluated the presentation of the shown influencer post positively. In contrast, type-2 and type-3 adolescents assessed influencers more negatively and thus chose a different form of self-presentation for themselves. Despite the knowledge that influencers could also pursue a commercial interest with their own profiles, type-2 adolescents did not accept that and rejected the primary task, whereby the connection between a private, personal moment, such as a gift for Mother's Day, and a commercial interest justified this assessment. Adolescents belonging to the type-5 group again differed regarding their assessments – depending on which variant of self-presentation was important to them and which they preferred for influencers.

Finally, advertising literacy comprises the application of knowledge (performance dimension). The main question here is how to apply knowledge about the functioning and mechanisms of advertising messages (e.g., acting as self-presentation; a consumer's adaptation behavior). As explained in chapter 4.2, all the interviewees followed one or more influencers. However, their concrete self-presentation was only partially oriented toward their perceptions regarding influencers' self-presentation and thus on their ability to evaluate the shown content. They did not always use influencers as role models and consciously decided against an adaptation of their perceptions of influencers' self-presentation. Type 2 was much more critical of influencers and applied its cognitive and attitudinal advertising literacy accordingly in its self-presentation. For this type, influencers were not an inspiration or role model. In particular, for those who preferred staged self-presentation, an orientation toward influencers became apparent – their cognitive and attitudinal advertising literacy was pronounced, but these dimensions had not been applied to their own self-presentation.

With regard to the impact on adolescents' consumer preferences, the type-2 group was not affected by influencers to the same extent as the others. However, the adolescents' negative evaluations did not automatically lead to a rejection of the implied advertising message and product. The more negatively evaluating type-2 adolescents sometimes still drew inspiration from influencers and bought an advertised product but indeed less often than those who expressed a more positive attitude toward influencers, such as the type-1 adolescents. The latter's purchase decisions were affected by influencers, and they tried out advertised products (in general as well as the perfume shown in the primary task). If an influencer advertised a product, type-1 adolescents perceived it as 'cool' (Bastian, aged 16) and something they wanted to try and perhaps would not have bought without the influencer's recommendation.

5. Discussion

This article analyzes adolescents' self-presentation on Instagram, the role that influencers might play in such content, and adolescents' advertising literacy, defined as the ability to recognize and to evaluate advertising presented by influencers, as well as influencers' self-presentation, and the capacity to act according to their own advertising knowledge. The results show that adolescents differ in the ways that they present themselves and are able to articulate and justify these differences. Five types of self-presentation have been identified (RQ 1). According to Yau and Reich (2018), some adolescents use a staged form of self-presentation to show themselves in a positive way. This form of self-presentation is closely linked to the expectations of referent others; above all, peers are important for this type of presentation (Siibak

2009). Furthermore, forms of presentation change over time, as Chua and Chang (2016) already noted. Finally, adolescents are able to find their own approaches to self-presentation. On the one hand, they do so by using a non-staged form of self-presentation, but this can also be influenced by their circles of peers and friends. On the other hand, they use two or more accounts (together with close friends; Yau and Reich 2018). They are thus able to not only orient themselves toward the expectations of referent others but also follow their own paths regarding self-presentation and prioritize their own expectations and demands over those of referent others.

This chosen form of self-presentation is closely linked to the role that influencers play for them (RQ 2). Influencers stage themselves as role models, deal with topics that are closely related to the everyday lives of adolescents, and ‘can be regarded as highly popular and admired peers’ (de Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson 2019, 12). Due to these characteristics, the interviewed adolescents follow them regularly. However, their visual selves could, but do not have to, orient themselves toward influencers and their self-presentation. Even if referent others are important for self-presentation (Geber and Hefner 2019; Yau and Reich 2018), the findings show that only those adolescents who opt for a staged form are guided by influencers’ self-presentation. Influencers are much more often role models for those adolescents. They serve as inspirations and are perceived as sympathetic and close to the adolescents’ own world. For the remaining adolescents, influencers are less relevant to their self-presentation. Their attitudes toward influencers’ presentations and often highly embellished online appearances is the most critical; furthermore, they orient themselves toward their own demands or the expectations of their friends.

However, this finding does not mean that influencers per se are irrelevant to adolescents. On the contrary, trying out recommended products is also conceded by adolescents who distance themselves from influencers for the sake of self-expression (except type 3). The findings thus confirm the assumptions of de Veirman et al. (2019) because adolescents not only appreciate influencers’ recommendations but also trust their advice; if influencers recommend the product, it cannot be that bad.

Based on the dimensions of advertising literacy, the interviewed adolescents can be considered advertising literate in terms of knowledge and evaluation (RQ 3). Even the placement of advertising does not cause them any difficulties. With one exception, they were able to recognize the shown advertising content and evaluate it – positively or negatively. However, their use of knowledge differs. Adolescents who prefer a staged self-presentation do not act according to their knowledge and orientate their self-presentation and consumer behavior toward influencers’ self-presentation. On the other hand, adolescents with a critical and mostly negative evaluation of influencers are seldom influenced and instead apply their knowledge with regard to their self-presentation. However, sometimes they make their consumer decisions based on the recommendations of influencers but less often than those who express

a more positive attitude toward influencers. An influence of age on advertising literacy in terms of all three dimensions cannot be confirmed by the available findings (Hudders and Cauberghe 2018; Hudders et al. 2017; Roedder John 1999; Rozendaal, Buijzen, and Valkenburg 2011; Schulze 2012).

Depending on how participants present themselves, they arrive at a positive or a negative assessment of the advertising message. However, this assessment is not always linked to the corresponding action because even those adolescents who had a negative assessment of product placement would buy the product. This finding highlights the need to focus advertising literacy not only on cognitive skills (pure knowledge), but also on evaluation and action (Pfaff-Rüdiger and Riesmeyer 2016; Rozendaal et al. 2011). The distinction between dispositional and situational advertising literacy proposed by Hudders et al. (2017) is helpful in this context. In this way, the application of the cognitive dimension in the confrontation with advertising messages can be grasped – because knowledge alone is not enough. It must be activated and applied in each concrete situation in order to evaluate and, if necessary, reject advertising messages.

Despite the meaningfulness of the findings, this study has three limitations. Although qualitative interviews are suitable for adolescents to reflect on their actions and behaviors, it cannot be ruled out that they present socially desirable answers. By asking second-order questions and creating an impression of the entire interview, this response behavior can be put into perspective but not be completely excluded. Moreover, the sample is small due to the qualitative research design. Under certain circumstances, a larger sample would mean that the two types (3 and 4) with very small numbers of participants would include more adolescents and thus be more meaningful. Finally, based on the chosen qualitative research design, it is not possible to analyze causal relationships between self-presentation and advertising literacy. Instead, the aim was to identify possible compounds and thus provide an approach for future research. Despite these three limitations, the findings contribute to the current state of research. The typology shows the different ways in which adolescents use Instagram, how this use may change over time, and what they adopt as a guide for self-presentation. Thereby, the importance of one's own expectations for one's self-presentation becomes clear. Future studies could use this typology as a starting point, expand on it, and examine whether it can be transferred to other social media platforms, such as Snapchat or TikTok. Furthermore, one possibility is to extend the age range (younger or adult users) in order to investigate whether self-presentation changes with age since advertising literacy is developed in childhood and adolescence and “is further refined when consumers become experienced” (Hudders and Cauberghe 2018, 207).

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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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Brand Endorsers with Role Model Function Social Media Influencers' Self-Perception and Advertising Literacy

Jessica Kühn  and Claudia Riesmeyer 

Abstract

Social media influencers (SMIs) are taking on new roles in the communication environment of their followers as persuasive agents, opinion leaders, brand endorsers, and role models. Taking a look from the perspective of SMIs as agents in the persuasion attempt and their advertising literacy, our study has three aims. First, we provide insight into SMIs' self-perception as opinion-leading brand endorsers. Second, we discuss the extent to which SMIs use this awareness of and knowledge about their role model function for their particular young followers. Finally, we show how SMIs actively construct their media persona and how their relationship with their followers is based around this identity. The results from 15 semi-structured, guideline-based interviews conducted in 2019 with German SMIs working in different subject areas (e.g., fitness, fashion, travel, and family) show that SMIs are advertising literate. SMIs are aware of their multiple roles (understanding of one's roles: conceptual dimension), and reflect about their media persona's role model function (role interpretation: attitudinal dimension). Therefore, the majority of SMIs create their content and their media persona, as well as actively construct their relationship to their followers, based on their knowledge and awareness (role construction: performance dimension).

Markenbotschafter mit Vorbildfunktion? Social Media Influencers' Selbstwahrnehmung und Werbekompetenz

Zusammenfassung

*Sogenannte Social Media Influencer*innen (SMI) übernehmen als Werbebotschafter, mediale Entscheidungsträger, Online-Meinungsführer und Kommunikationspartner eine neue Rolle in der Kommunikationsumgebung ihrer Follower*innen. Basierend auf dem Persuasion Knowledge Model und der Konzeption von Werbekompetenz bestehend aus den Dimensionen Wissen, Einstellung und Handeln untersucht die Studie, wie SMI ihre mediale Rolle konstruieren, inwiefern sie sich ihrer Vorbildrolle für die insbesondere jungen Follower*innen bewusst sind und wie sie mit ihren Followern*innen interagieren. Im Jahr 2019 wurden fünfzehn halbstrukturierte leitfadengestützte Interviews mit SMI in Deutschland geführt, die in verschiedenen Themenbereichen tätig sind (z.B. Fitness, Mode, Rei-*

sen, Familie). Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass SMI als werbekompetent gekennzeichnet werden können: Sie kennen ihre Funktionen (Rollenverständnis: Wissensdimension) und sind sich der damit verbundenen Wirkung ihres medialen Auftritts auf ihre Follower*innen bewusst (Rolleninterpretation: Einstellungsdimension). Auf Basis dieses Wissens und des Bewusstseins wählen sie konkret Inhalte für die Selbstdarstellung aus, konstruieren ihr mediales Erscheinungsbild bewusst und entscheiden sich proaktiv, inwieweit sie mit ihren Follower*innen interagieren (Rollenkonstruktion: Handlungsdimension).

1. Introduction

Brands and companies have developed numerous strategies and methods to contact their potential target groups on social network sites (SNS) (e.g. Siegert 2013; Tropp 2016). These include their own SNS brand accounts and respective profile pages as well as paid advertisements, sponsored contributions, and electronic word of mouth (eWOM; Evans et al. 2017; de Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017). In doing so, these companies have recognized the potential of individual SNS users who stand out through their high presence and activity on SNS and use them as brand endorsers for a wide range of products and services (e.g., Möller 2011; Nirschl and Steinberg 2018; Seeger and Kost 2019): So-called social media influencers (SMIs; i.e., individual influential SNS users with a large number of followers to whom they provide specific content) have become integrated as disseminators in brands' marketing strategies (e.g., Enke and Borchers 2019; Hudders et al. 2017; Schach and Lommatzsch 2018).

As a result, a new marketing sector has evolved (e.g., Jahnke 2018; Nirschl and Steinberg 2018; Seeger and Kost 2019). Advertisers use social media influencer marketing by offering incentives, such as payment or free products; they encourage SMIs to create and distribute brand-related creative and authentic content embedded in their profile (de Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017). This marketing strategy has become increasingly popular, as it makes it easier to reach a large consumer segment in a relatively short time at a low cost compared to other marketing forms (e.g., Herrmann 2017; Phua, Jin, and Kim 2017). Additionally, SMIs also provide access to target groups, such as children and adolescents, who are hard to reach through conventional advertising (de Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson 2019; de Vries, Gensler, and Leeftang 2012). The most popular SNS for SMI marketing to such young target groups is Instagram (Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2020; Evans et al. 2017; Faßmann and Moss 2016), as the platform has become tremendously successful: On the one hand Instagram stands out in terms of its number of users (e.g., Bitkom Research 2018; Hessischer Rundfunk: Desk Kommunikation 2020), with a vast community of young users (e.g., Germany: Feierabend et al. 2020). On the other hand it is also the second-most important SNS for companies (Statista 2020b). Furthermore, Instagram

“lends itself very well for eWOM purposes because products and brands can be visually imaged and named in the caption of the photo” (de Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017, 799).

Taking a closer look at persuasive SMI communication on Instagram, there are two relevant actors: SMI themselves and their target group. Following Friestad and Wright’s Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM; 1994), both the target (follower) and the agent (SMI) are equal parties of a persuasion attempt and draw on their respective persuasion knowledge to manage a persuasion episode. In terms of the perspective of (especially young) targets of SMI marketing (i.e., persuasive SMI advertising), academic research already exists. This includes insights regarding target’s persuasion knowledge (e.g., Boerman, Willemsen, and Van Der Aa 2017) – that is, children’s and adolescents’ specific advertising literacy (e.g., Young 2003; Livingstone and Helsper 2006; Hudders et al. 2017) and their understanding of specific persuasive tactics of advertisers, such as celebrity endorsements (Rozendaal, Buijzen, and Valkenburg 2011).

While quite a bit is known about the target group, researchers have not explored SMIs’ role as agents in great depth. So far, some research exists on SMIs from an external perspective, particularly from an economic and a communication studies perspective (e.g., Schach and Lommatzsch 2018; e.g., Jahnke 2018; Stubb, Nyström, and Colliander 2019; Enke and Borchers 2018b; 2019). Several studies have empirically investigated the extent to which SMI marketing is effective in achieving branding results, such as positive brand attitudes and purchase intentions (e.g., de Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017; de Jans, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2019; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020). Moreover, studies have also investigated the legal frameworks in which SMIs operate as organizational stakeholders and brand endorsers (e.g., Brecht 2019; Enke et al. 2019) as well as their different roles as strategic communicators (Enke and Borchers 2019).

Despite these research results from the perspective of external perception, there is a lack of more in-depth insights on SMIs themselves. This omission is notable if one assumes that both parties involved in opinion- and behavior-related persuasiveness must possess a certain level of persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994). That said, what knowledge do SMIs bring to the persuasion episode, and how do they use it to pursue their goals? For the purposes of our study, we translate SMIs’ advertising-related target and persuasion knowledge as advertising literacy, which consists of three dimensions (Rozendaal et al. 2011; Rozendaal, Oprea, and Buijzen 2016): The first dimension covers “the ability to recognize and understand advertising messages”, which is *conceptual advertising literacy* (Rozendaal et al. 2016, 74). We operationalize this dimension as SMIs’ knowledge both of themselves as SMIs and of their role as opinion leaders as well as brand endorsers. The second dimension deals with the “critical attitude towards advertising” (Rozendaal et al. 2016,

74). We refer to this as *attitudinal advertising literacy* and define it as SMIs' ability to critically reflect about their relevance to their followers and their awareness of their role model function. SMIs as agents have to circumvent this attitudinal perception in the context of their persuasion attempt. The last dimension stresses the retrieval of knowledge (Rozendaal et al. 2011; Rozendaal, Oprea, and Buijzen 2016). We refer to this dimension as *advertising literacy performance* and operationalize it as the ability to apply this knowledge – that is, how SMIs specifically construct their role by selecting certain content for publication and to what extent they orient their content to their target group. Up until now, most research on advertising literacy has focused on target groups but not on the agents. This study addresses this desideratum and adapts the concept of advertising literacy as persuasion knowledge of SMIs. We aim to explain advertising literacy from the perception of the SMIs and to gain insights into the SMIs' function as actors within the advertising industry. With this in mind, we conducted 15 in-depth interviews with German SMIs of different thematic sectors on Instagram, focusing on their role understanding, on their role construction, and on their perception of their role model function.

2. Theoretical Framework: Social Media Influencer as Agents in the Persuasion Knowledge Model and Their Advertising Literacy

Friestad and Wright's Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM; 1994) focuses on how both people's knowledge of persuasion, as well as their agent and topic knowledge, influence their interpretation, evaluation, and coping of persuasion attempts, whereby both parties of the interaction are included. By using PKM's considerations as our theoretical framework, we can understand SMIs as agents. They are the responsible actors in the persuasion attempt, and their followers are the influenceable targets.

Previous empirical research has often dealt with the recipient's side as the target group of persuasion attempts (e.g., Evans and Park 2015; Boerman, Willemsen, and Van Der Aa 2017; de Pelsmacker and Neijens 2012) because the emphasis of the PKM was "on the active role of the target [and therefore] the majority of the PKM-related research focuses on the better understanding the target" (M. Campbell and Kirmani 2008, 563). However, this study changes the focus and addresses the agents' side – in this case, the SMI, because it is also "important to understand the agent in terms of the agent's knowledge about the target, beliefs about the target's knowledge, and interactions with the target" (M. Campbell and Kirmani 2008, 563). Including the SMIs own perception of their function, means to empirically focus on their knowledge dimensions. In this context, Friestad and Wright (1994) name three knowledge structures brought into the persuasion attempt, and which cannot be thought of individually because they are linked to each other (see also M. Campbell and Kirmani 2008):

- *Topic Knowledge*: This knowledge structure includes the beliefs about the specific topic (e.g., prior knowledge about the product) of the persuasion attempt (Friestad and Wright 1994), which means that the “product or issue expertise would be part of topic knowledge, with experts displaying higher topic knowledge than novices” (M. Campbell and Kirmani 2008, 552). However, we will not discuss this specific expertise further in our study, as we are not interested in what knowledge SMIs have about individual products.
- *Target/Agent Knowledge*: This knowledge structure comprises the knowledge about the target group respectively agent regarding their characteristics and skills. This structure includes general knowledge, or schemas, and specific knowledge about small subgroups or even individuals (for agent knowledge, see also M. Campbell and Kirmani 2008).
- *Persuasion Knowledge*: Friestad and Wright (1994) assign a unique role to this knowledge structure. It includes the knowledge available to an agent for persuasion attempts (e.g., advertiser’s motives, strategies, and tactics) – both to recognize them, to manage them, and to cope with them. It serves as a kind of “schemer schema” (Wright 1985).

We employ the target and persuasion knowledge as our theoretical framework for the present study because SMIs as agents use these knowledge structures in “the development, selection, and use of persuasion attempts” (M. Campbell and Kirmani 2008; see Figure 1):

- *Target Knowledge*: To comprehend the SMIs’ perspective, this knowledge structure must be thought of as the framework of their persuasion knowledge, especially when the focus is on young followers. SMIs permeate adolescent users’ everyday lives, which is becoming increasingly important due to adolescents’ potentially greater susceptibility (and vulnerability) to being influenced (Bitkom Research 2018; Feierabend et al. 2020; Theunert and Schorb 2004; Miller and Prinstein 2019). Thus, better understanding the relevance of SMIs in the socialization of adolescents, in addition to traditional socialization agents, seems urgent (Riesmeyer, Sawatzki, and Hagleitner 2021).
- *Persuasion Knowledge*: Transferred to the role of SMIs as agents in the persuasion attempt, we translate this schematic knowledge structure based on the dimensions of advertising literacy (Rozendaal et al. 2011; Rozendaal, Oprea, and Buijzen 2016; see also Young 2003; M. Campbell and Kirmani 2008; Wright, Friestad, and Boush 2005). As SMIs are part of the social media advertising market, we assume their persuasion knowledge influences how they conceptualize and implement persuasive messages in their content. Persuasion knowledge and implementation thereby includes, first, the knowledge SMIs have about their role (*conceptual*

advertising literacy), how they evaluate their role (attitudinal advertising literacy), and how they draw on this knowledge and evaluation for their own behavior (advertising literacy performance).

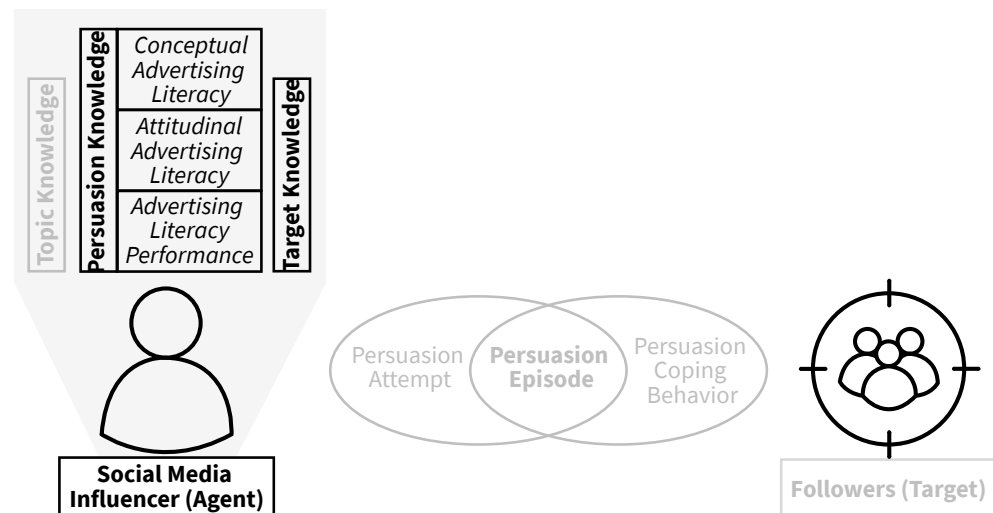


Fig. 1.: The study's focus on persuasion knowledge as advertising literacy and on target knowledge (authors' own illustration based on Friestad and Wright's PKM, 1994).

2.1 Social Media Influencers' Knowledge about Their Roles

We first consider *conceptual advertising literacy* in this study, which includes knowing the advertiser's intentions, goals, and tactics. According to Rozendaal and colleagues (2011; see also Wright, Friestad, and Boush 2005), this dimension comprises several components, such as recognition of both advertisements and their source as well as the understanding of the advertiser's intent and tactics. In terms of SMIs, conceptual advertising literacy covers their knowledge about these very components of the persuasion attempt as well as their knowledge of themselves as a source of advertising. As agents in the advertising persuasion attempt, SMIs must know and understand their role as advertisers to use this knowledge. Taking a closer look at the concept of SMIs (specifically on what SMIs should know about themselves), we will consider two things: a) their role as opinion leaders and b) how they take advantage of this role as brand endorsers. Essentially, SMIs are people who construct their own social media identity and master their self-presentation, thus building their brand image. Thereby, they gain other users' attention and win them over as followers (e.g., Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017; Jin and Muqaddam 2019). In turn, all that effort increases the level of awareness of those brands with which SMIs cooperate and which they endorse via specially created content (Eunjin and Heather 2020). Thus, SMIs act as co-producers and mediators of advertising messages to their followers

(Sundermann and Raabe 2019). In this way, they unite several functions originally carried out by several different actors (Enke and Borchers 2018a). The term “SMI”, thus, is associated with other actor titles and definitions, such as “creative agencies, advertising media, journalistic media, testimonial givers, and opinion leaders” (Enke and Borchers 2019, 267).

For this study, we base our conceptual description of SMIs on the opinion leader concept (Geise 2017; Leißner et al. 2014) to describe what characterizes SMIs. Opinion leaders influence others’ attitudes and behaviors through their interpersonal communication and behavior (Dressler and Telle 2009). Their influence on opinion-forming and decision-making processes is attributable to the fact that others ascribe opinion leaders a particular expertise (e.g., in a specific topic area); SMIs also possess certain personality traits and social and communicative skills (Katz 1957; also Geise 2017). However, it is impossible to dichotomously distinguish whether a person is or is not an opinion leader. Instead, the definition focusses on the “degree to which an individual can influence informally other individuals’ attitudes or overt behavior in the desired way with relative frequency” (Rogers and Shoemaker 1971, 199).

Transferred to SMIs, they can be considered as a new type of online/digital opinion leaders, who use the advantages of SNS for their purposes (e.g., Abidin 2016; Duckwitz 2019; Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017; Schach and Lommatzsch 2018). Considering the personality traits of SMIs as opinion leaders – their charisma and their attractiveness, thus their social media persona, as well as their credibility – is as important as their degree of extroversion (Schach 2018; see also Geise 2017). As opinion leaders, SMIs are also credited with a high degree of authenticity, which they (must) ensure their followers (Raun 2018; Casalo, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2020). Authenticity is, thereby, a multi-layered construct that is often connected with such attributes as genuineness, truthfulness, and originality (Molleda 2010). Furthermore, SMIs possess specific thematic knowledge and expertise that can be monomorphic or polymorphic (see Merton 1968). Thus, some SMIs are dedicated to one topic, whereas others are devoted to various topics. Finally, communicative skills are central to SMIs. They must demonstrate continuity and heightened activity while communicating with their followers (Geise 2017), a skill that Trepte and Böcking (2009) consider the basis of opinion leadership. Communicative literacy means SMIs can prepare content for specific target groups and effectively communicate and disseminate it via their respective communication channels (Schach 2018). Communicativeness is fundamental to everything that constitutes SMIs, as they must “signal accessibility, availability, presence [and] connectedness” (Raun 2018, 99). Furthermore, Schenk (1995) described communicative literacy as the capacity to encourage and facilitate discussion.

SIMs consciously use all these attributes and qualities as opinion leaders to fill their role as brand endorsers, since opinion leadership is an essential element in marketing (e.g., Pöyry et al. 2019; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020). Thus, SIMs can be understood as strategic communication actors (Borchers 2019; Enke and Borchers 2019), whom companies integrate specifically into their communication activities (Zerfaß et al. 2016). In this sense, SIMs “represent a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (Freberg 2011, 90).

Enke and Borchers (2019) consider the size and quality of the SIMs’ relationship network (i.e., their followers) and their various functions and tasks. The former factor is relevant because the number of people reached by SIMs is of great importance and one argument for advertising to customers in this manner (Bulkow, Urban, and Schweiger 2010). Several typologies of SIMs have been developed based on this attribute (e.g., Statista 2020a; C. Campbell and Farrell 2020). Overall, there is a consensus that SIMs with comparatively few followers – that is, “nano-influencers” (between 0 and 5/10k followers, depending on the definition) – can nevertheless function as successful advertisers. “Micro-influencers”, who have between 10k and 100k followers, are also mentioned. SIMs with more than 100k followers are often called “macro-influencers” (C. Campbell and Farrell 2020). However, a more significant number of followers does not necessarily correspond with a greater degree of influence: SIMs who are relatively less popular can be more effective endorsers when, for instance, they are experts in a relatively small field/topic and are, therefore, more engaged with their audience (de Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020). Besides, SIMs can also be differentiated by the core platform on which they operate (e.g., ‘Instagrammer’ or ‘YouTuber’), their thematic expertise (e.g., fitness bloggers), the origin of their popularity (e.g., if they first became popular due to their presence on SNS), or their regional focus (Enke and Borchers 2018a).

Thus, if we start from opinion leadership and brand endorsement as two role concepts as a definitional attempt and understand them as a basic level of conceptual advertising literacy as part of persuasion knowledge, the question arises to what extent influencers themselves have this knowledge about their function. To what extent is their conceptual advertising literacy developed? And to what extent are they aware of these precise roles and their characteristics and their functions? Therefore, we ask: How do SIMs perceive their roles as opinion leaders and brand endorsers (RQ 1)?

2.2 Social Media Influencers' Perception of their Role Model Function

Attitudinal advertising as a component of persuasion knowledge is understood as “having a critical attitude toward advertising” (Rozendaal, Opre, and Buijzen 2016, 74). It includes skepticism toward and belief in the appropriateness of sponsored content – that is, a kind of protective firewall to persuasion attempts (Rozendaal, Opre, and Buijzen 2016; see also, Boerman et al. 2018; D’Alessio, Laghi, and Baiocco 2009; Derbaix and Pecheux 2003). Thus, we understand that attitudinal advertising literacy is about a moral attitude toward advertising:

“Moral advertising literacy reflects individuals’ ability to develop thoughts about the moral appropriateness of specific advertising formats and comprises the general moral evaluations individuals hold toward these formats (e.g., advergames, brand placement, or TV commercials) and toward advertising in general, including its persuasive tactics (e.g., humor or celebrity endorsements, using personal data to customize commercial messages)” (Hudders et al. 2017, 337).

With this conceptualization, attitudinal advertising literacy also focuses on reflexive skills.

Adapted for SMIs, attitudinal advertising literacy emphasizes the ability to develop a moral attitude toward their roles as opinion leaders and brand endorsers as well as their media persona based on their conceptual knowledge about themselves. SMIs with attitudinal advertising literacy should be able to critically reflect about their roles and be aware of their relevance for the target group. Within the context of these roles – that is, through their agent behavior in terms of their high level of online activity, sizeable online following, and apparent self-confidence (Jäckel 2011) – SMIs become role models, as their followers orient themselves toward them (e.g., influencing commercial decisions by product recommendations or product placement).

While attitudinal advertising literacy on the target side comprises “low-effort, attitudinal mechanisms that can be effective in reducing children’s advertising susceptibility under conditions of low elaboration” (Rozendaal et al. 2011, 344), for agents, the opposite is the case. SMIs as agents have to circumvent or breakthrough this attitudinal barrier in the context of their persuasion attempt. SMI advertising on Instagram exemplifies the native advertising approach. Unlike regular advertisers, SMIs – presenting themselves as approachable, (para)social friends – include advertisements in their content without triggering the same coping mechanisms as traditional advertising. Native advertising can surreptitiously prevent consumers from recognizing advertisements and thereby circumvent coping mechanisms. In other words, SMIs’ knowledge about and attitudes toward their role(s) includes or promotes the formation of an awareness of their relevance as persuasive agents vis-à-vis their target group. To the best of our knowledge, previous research has not addressed the

critical view of SMIs' role perceptions. Therefore, we ask to what extent SMIs are aware of their role model function based on their perception of their follower's ideas about their content and integration of persuasive messages (RQ 2)?

2.3 Social Media Influencers' Role Construction: Media Persona and Perceived Relationship with Followers

From conceptual advertising literacy as well as attitudinal advertising literacy comes *advertising literacy performance*, which is the ability to use the conceptual advertising knowledge (Rozendaal et al. 2011; Rozendaal, Oprea, and Buijzen 2016). It covers the ability to retrieve and apply advertising-related knowledge and attitudes about advertising for individual persuasion attempts (Rozendaal, Oprea, and Buijzen 2016; see also, Rozendaal, Buijzen, and Valkenburg 2012; Brucks, Armstrong, and Goldberg 1988).

If SMIs know what constitutes their role and have an attitude toward this role in terms of their role model function, they can actively perform their role(s) on this basis. For them, as strategic actors in the persuasion attempt, this means how they construct their media persona and how they perceive their relationship to their audience, e.g., their followers. For this conscious role construction, they use the functions they hold as opinion-leading brand endorsers. Opinion leaders have been ascribed several functions that are also evident among SMI in the online context (Geise 2017).

A key factor for influencers (and their success on SNS) is their content and their self-presentation. To fulfil their diverse tasks in this area – concerning content creation, production, distribution, and promotion – SMIs use their communicative skills and functions. They create and distribute brand-related creative and authentic content. That comprises the information function, i.e., a SMI conveys information but also helps in interpreting that information (thus also demonstrating an orientation function). Importantly, this information can be used by SMIs to advertise products to their followers. At the same time, SMIs act as gatekeepers in a certain sense (e.g., Engelmann 2016; White 1950) by selecting topics and collaborations to identify and define themselves, which they then present to their followers. In this way, they represent a kind of relays to their followers; a function also attributed to opinion leaders (Dressler and Telle 2009). This, in turn, affords SMIs a legitimizing function, as they communicate and disseminate information to demonstrate its relevance to their community (Grewal, Mehta, and Kardes 2000). Consequently, by consciously selecting content and thus legitimizing it, SMIs actively fulfil various tasks, based on their performance skills. These include multi-layered role tasks, as they often combine different role functions and are characterized by border-crossing qualities (Enke and Borchers 2018b; 2019): Some SMIs perform both as content producers and as content

distributors while, at the same time, providing testimonials. Thus they combine four performance characteristics: content production, content distribution and multiplication, influence, and social relations (which brings us back to opinion leadership) (for an overview, see Sundermann and Raabe 2019). Finally, some SMIs have a great degree of visibility and popularity, and they achieve a high level of prominence based on their relationships with certain groups/topics (Marwick 2015; Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017). This, in turn, plays into the role model function, which shows how cross-linked persuasion knowledge is.

In addition to the content, the active performance of SMIs on SNS includes their relationship with their network (i.e., with their followers). Because SMIs can rely on their heightened communicative skills to interact with their followers and are technically approachable through various SNS, they have enhanced and multiple opportunities to engage in dynamic relationships with their followers. These relationships can culminate in intensive parasocial interactions between SMIs and their followers (Hartmann 2017). Thereby, parasocial interaction theoretically implies that media users are under the illusion of participating in mutual interactions with media figures (Leißner et al. 2014). This type of parasocial interaction, typified by perceived intimacy and imaginary relationships that play out on interactive platforms, such as Instagram, is a striking feature unique to SMIs (Jin 2018; Jin and Muqaddam 2019). More specifically on Instagram, application features, such as stories or posts, give followers the impression that they can interact with ‘their’ SMI (e.g., using an active form of address or the opportunity to comment on content). Consequently, based on several parasocial interaction situations, a relationship pattern emerges, based on which a connection to the media figure – in this case, SMIs – develops (e.g., Schramm and Hartmann 2010). For SMIs, parasocial relationships with their followers are mainly created by their SNS activity’s intensity and frequency. Therefore, SMIs can be understood as parasocial opinion leaders – that is, opinion leaders who engage in various parasocial relationships (Leißner et al. 2014).

What makes these parasocial relationships between SMI and their followers particularly interesting and unique is the opportunity for mutual communication via numerous features, such as Instagram’s direct messaging features (text and voice) or query functions, through which real dialogues can occur. The resulting relationships can be particularly strong (Abidin 2016; García-Rapp 2017), as the effect of distance is minimized by authentic dialogue (Raun 2018). Followers may even experience a kind of friendship with SMIs, such that the latter can assume the “role of an admired friend who supports them, who also shows herself vulnerable and needs their support” (García-Rapp 2017, 17). Following the idea of parasocial interaction, however, these friendships remain essentially one-sided (Lee and Watkins 2016).

From this, we can conclude that SMIs can partly use their persuasion knowledge to construct their media persona and their (para)social relationship by using special features based on their advertising literacy skills. Therefore, we are interested in the specific knowledge SMIs use in this regard and the extent to which they are aware of how they actively construct their media persona, how they perceive their audience, and how they construct their relationship. Thus, we ask how do SMIs construct their media persona and their relationship to their followers (RQ 3)?

3. Method: Qualitative Interviews with Social Media Influencers

To answer our research questions, we chose a qualitative approach. Between June and August 2019, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 SMIs.¹ This methodological design is well-suited for examining mindsets, opinions, knowledge, and behaviors (Flick 2021; Meyen et al. 2019; Springer et al. 2015) because these perceptions are often complex and subconscious. As a result, it is often difficult to quantify these opinions and perceptions. Instead, this approach allows us to openly capture the self-perceptions of the SMIs, without a priori focusing on a particular expression or manner. It offers more time and space to reflect openly on their self-perceptions and resulting actions. Besides, the choice of this methodological approach yielded two additional benefits. First, the interviews were based on an interview guideline, which ensured that identical topics were discussed in each interview so that the interviews could be compared. Second, the semi-structured format allowed the respondents a certain level of openness and the freedom to adapt their responses to each question (Keuneke 2017; Springer et al. 2015).

3.1 Participants

To draw wide-ranging and diverse conclusions, it was important to include a broad sample of SMIs. For this reason, the term “SMI” and, thus, the prospective study participants were defined fairly broadly. Prospective interviewees needed to manage their individual and personal public account on Instagram, which needed to be sufficiently popular so that opinions and/or advertising could be spread widely to and among their followers. Thus, prospective interviewees were not required to have a certain number of followers to be included in this study. In addition, SMIs should be representative of various subject areas (e.g., lifestyle, health, fitness, fashion, etc.) to gain insights into the most diverse forms of SMIs’ self-perception as possible.

¹ The interviews are part of a joint research project with Antonia Markiewitz and Ulrike Schwertberger. We would like to thank them for their support in data collection, transcription, and analysis.

We recruited all of the participants through the ‘direct messages’ feature of the social media network Instagram. We chose this recruitment process because the prospective interviewees should be familiar with this SNS given their regular use (Meyen et al. 2019). Additionally, we used direct messaging to ensure a more personal approach and to increase the probability of an interview agreement – accordingly, their management was not contacted. We contacted the SMIs via private accounts and were transparent about our affiliation with LMU Munich and its work. For this purpose, in order to react to the functionality of the algorithms on Instagram, we began interacting with the SMIs before their planned recruitment via ‘likes’ and other content reactions. We finally made contact in response to a current ‘Instagram story’ so that the message would stand out among the likely numerous messages in the SMIs’ inboxes. The majority of the interviews were conducted by telephone, with each interview lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. Some interviewees chose not to do the telephone interview, so they were instead interviewed via direct message on Instagram.

To select the sample, we looked for German-speaking SMIs who have a publicly accessible account. In order to have the greatest possible variety of different topics and reach, we did not consciously select according to these two criteria. In total, we researched 45 SMIs with whom we made contact. We did this by following them with our official accounts, liking posts and responding to them on story shares. By doing this, we wanted to increase the chance of appearing in their personal DMs. The goal of the recruitment was not a complete mapping of SMIs’ topics or types; we wanted a sample as accessible as possible to get first insights into the perception of SMIs themselves.

Of the 45 SMIs contacted via Instagram, 15 agreed to be interviewed (see Table 1). Of those interviewed, ten were female, and five were male, all aged 21 to 36 years. The sample included accounts that ranged from 7k to 184k followers: two macro- (>100k), twelve micro- (10–100k), and one nano-SMI (<10k). Besides, the respondents were active in various subject areas, such as lifestyle, health, fitness, and fashion but also research and science. Eight respondents worked full time as SMIs (i.e., they were not employed elsewhere).

ID	Gender	Age	Subject Area	Full Time	Part Time
id101	m	24	Lifestyle, Fitness	x	
id102	f	23	Health, Vegan Food, Fitness	x	
id103	f	29	Lifestyle, Food, Sport	x	
id104	f	25	Lifestyle, Fashion		x
id105	f	27	Lifestyle, Fashion	x	
id106	f	26	Lifestyle		x
id107	m	27	Lifestyle, Photography		x
id108	f	24	Lifestyle		x
id109	f	21	Family, Health, Vegan	x	
id110	m	36	Environmental protection, Photography		x
id111	m	28	Fitness, Health, Food	x	
id112	f	23	Lifestyle		x
id113	f	33	Family, Lifestyle, Fashion	x	
id114	m	24	Fitness, Health		x
id115	f	29	Lifestyle, Family, Food	x	

Tab. 1.: Sample characteristics.

3.2 Interview guideline

The interview guideline was theory driven (Meyen et al. 2019). The first guideline category served as an introduction to the interview and contained questions on private social media usage – more precisely, on the respondents’ SNS choices and motivations for these choices. The following parts of the questionnaire were dedicated to the theoretical focal points of the study:

- *Conceptual advertising literacy*: SMIs’ understanding of their profession (whether they viewed themselves as a SMI and when they became a SMI).
- *Attitudinal advertising literacy*: recognition of SMIs’ responsibility toward their followers as well as their critical self-perception of their role model function.
- *Advertising literacy performance*: professional use of social media, the construction of their own social media identity, cooperation with companies (including which companies and why), and perception of the target group (to what extent they could picture their audience, how they would communicate with them, and which specific Instagram functions were used).

We transferred all the sections into 25 main questions and follow-up questions. The interviews were recorded and after that transcribed (word by word).

3.3 Data analysis

We analyzed the interview transcripts according to a theory-based approach (Meyen et al. 2019), with the dimensions of the guidelines comprising the basis of the category system used for the evaluation. The following categories were included:

- everyday life: private and professional use of social media;
- conceptual advertising literacy: knowledge about their respective roles as opinion leader and brand endorser;
- attitudinal advertising literacy: role model function;
- advertising literacy performance: role construction, construction of the relationship to their followers.

If necessary, we inductively supplemented these categories with further characteristics. All interview transcripts were read several times, and conspicuous passages of text belonging to the categories were marked. Subsequently, we discussed the assignments of the text passages to the categories and evaluated them according to a qualitative content analysis by Mayring (2015). In order to fulfill the quality criterions of intersubjective comprehensibility, we documented the entire evaluation process.

4. Results

Based on the qualitative interviews, we deduced three key findings. First, the findings show that the respondents perceive themselves as SMIs and have a concrete knowledge of their roles as opinion leaders and brand endorsers (knowledge such as conceptual advertising literacy). Second, the interviewed SMIs do reflect on their role model function (attitudinal advertising literacy). Third, the SMIs actively construct their media personas as well as their relationship to their target group (advertising literacy performance) based on this knowledge and their attitude toward themselves.

4.1 Self-Perception as Opinion Leading Brand Endorsers

RQ1 analyses the extent to which SMIs perceive their roles as opinion leaders and brand endorsers and the extent to which they view themselves as SMIs. The results were ambivalent. While some legitimized their role as SMIs and their corresponding activities as a profession, others consciously distanced themselves from the term “influencer”. One male interviewee remarked that due to his main job, he did not perceive himself as an SMI:

“I am a [occupational field] who also has an Instagram account. But, you know, I’m not primarily an influencer, and I don’t see myself as such personally”.
[id110].

Other interviewees stated that they became an SMI unintentionally, e.g.:

“I’d say I somehow slipped into being an influencer). [...] Why shouldn’t you earn a little bit of money with your hobby?” [id109].

Nevertheless, they seemed to reflect on their extraordinary job situation and were aware that they could not compare their occupation as SMIs to a traditional job, e.g.:

“And then you get a message like, ‘Oh my god, this is not a real job. I go to work eight hours a day.’ And stuff like that. They don’t take my job seriously. Of course, you can’t compare my job with an office job or anything like that. I’m honest. But I just have something creative” [id103].

Alongside their reflections on their self-perception, the interviewees also seemed to have thoroughly thought about their role as opinion leaders, e.g.:

“Because I am also asked for my opinion from time to time – and I also ask for an opinion” [id104].

This self-perception includes both the topics SMIs relate to such, as fitness, as well as questions about product placements, personal questions about their lives, or even asking for advice. Overall, there was broad consensus that it was extremely important to be aware of the possible effects of their online behavior, regardless of whether or not they considered themselves to be a SMI. They also appeared to be aware of their influence on their followers’ purchase intentions and attitudes (i.e., their role as brand endorsers). This finding can be seen, for example, in the following statement:

“Often I also get messages that someone has bought something I have advertised for and also thinks this product is great. Of course, I am pleased about that. You can see that the work is worth it” [id109].

Nevertheless, SMIs pursued different goals: On the one hand, some had monetary objectives, such as discount codes, e.g.:

“The companies will then tell you how often your discount code has been redeemed. That means either it’s worth working with you or it’s not” [id103].

On the other hand, occasionally, some SMIs revealed a self-perception that exceeded the interests of the traditional advertising medium, viewing themselves as personal and moral role models. One SMI said the following:

“Other influencers have something of their account, some kind of advertising cooperation or they get money for a post. I don’t have any of that. I invest time, sometimes many, many hours a day, and offer information for not one cent. Quite the contrary, I’m losing money” [id110].

4.2 Critical Reflections on Role Model Function

Closely linked to the results concerning SMIs' self-perception is RQ2, which addresses the following question: *To what extent do SMIs reflect on their function?* SMIs were indeed aware of their potential role model function to their followers, which they formed based on their knowledge (RQ1). Furthermore, they considered how their publicly expressed opinions, self-expression, and ultimately their behavior on SNS affect their followers. This attitudinal awareness ranged from serious, e.g.: "I have a huge responsibility to my followers" [id110] to casual, e.g.: "But even if I'm not a huge role model, I still think I can be an inspiration" [id109].

The awareness of SMIs about their function as a role model concerned knowledge about their potential influence on their followers' buying behavior. They recognized that followers are repurchasing certain things from them, as one participant noted:

"I'm sure some followers say: 'Wow, those pants look insanely good on her. I want those, too.'" [id105].

This economic dimension of the perceived role model function among SMIs cause them to carefully select the companies with whom they chose to cooperate. One SMI in particular, who is dedicated to a healthy, athletic lifestyle, said:

"I recently received a very good request, which was also very, very well paid. But I rejected it because I would have had to advertise an alcoholic drink [...] I wouldn't promote something like that, actually" [id101].

Another highlighted his responsibility in terms of the quality of the content advertised:

"Because otherwise I can push something on them, and they would buy it because of me. And if I offer them junk, they would hate me for it" [id103].

Yet taking a social perspective, the interviewed SMIs were cautious about which topics they communicated (e.g., topics related to life decisions or even strokes of fate or, generally, environmental protection). Interviewee said, for example, concerning her divorce:

"I had motivated so many women and in fact, after I separated, after I told a little bit, uh, what each individual woman is actually worth, uh, a lot of them divorced, too" [id103].

Another spoke about his passion as an environmentalist and his role as a role model in this regard (independent of financial benefits through cooperation):

“Being involved with sustainability, environmental protection, animal welfare, rarely brings money, but what brings money on Instagram are collaborations with companies like Procter & Gamble, who test on animals and destroy the environment” [id110].

SIMs with younger followers were especially conscious and reflective about their function as role models and, therefore, adapted their content and cooperated with companies even more consciously and actively. A male interviewee explained his responsibility like this:

“For me, the worst thing would be if I recommend something and then some 16-year-old kid buys it with his hard-saved pocket money, and it’s some kind of shit. I would be ashamed of myself” [id101].

They proactively addressed important issues, e.g., SIMs with a so-called lipedema: “I am a role model because I stand by my lipedema” [id105], and consciously refrained from others (e.g., drugs and alcohol). SIMs actively mentioned their young followers, if any:

“I think deeply about how I communicate [about alcohol consumption] because I am also addressing people who are not yet 16 or who are not yet 18” [id111].

4.3 Construction of Media Persona and Relationship with Followers

Indeed, this awareness of their role model function played a part in constructing their role, which RQ3 dealt with. RQ3 addresses the SIMs’ role performance – that is, how they construct their media persona and their relationship to their followers. All interviewees demonstrated pronounced social media awareness, based on which they carefully created their media persona. Thereby, two modes of personality construction became clear. Authenticity plays a crucial role for most of the SIMs. They sought to be as authentic as possible, which was not always due to altruistic motives but occasionally served an economic agenda, as one SIM indicated:

“I also think that the more authentic a person perceives you, the more likely the person will buy a product” [id109].

Again, it was evident that these considerations strongly affected the choice of collaborative partners, particularly to ensure that the advertised products matched the SIM’s media persona. SIMs actively and progressively deal with possible cooperation requests and questioned them (also regarding their role model function, RQ2), as evidenced by one respondent’s statement about her chosen collaborations:

“I was made an offer by a company that produces menstrual underwear. [...] I just said: ‘That doesn’t suit me. I’m sorry. I think what you do is great. [...] But it just doesn’t fit my content and the image I’m trying to create” [id108].

Another interviewee, who calls herself a “greenfluencer” and who in particular shares content about her role as a mother and about environmentally conscious living, said:

“The most important thing for me is that the product suits me. Jewelry, any fitness teas, and so on, I generally reject” [id109].

Thus, SMIs want to appear authentic in order to be able to create a closeness to their followers through this authenticity. Yet some SMIs made a conscious effort to construct a parallel world for themselves, as one said:

“Social media is quite a bit of a parallel world – a snapshot” [id101].

Others found themselves maintaining a balanced media persona, one which ranged between authenticity and parallelism, reality and fantasy:

“They always think my life is what I show them. But I show them, for example, maybe only one hour of my life, if at all – and the remaining 23 hours they don’t know what’s going on” [id103].

Even though all SMI perceived themselves as actively reflecting upon their role, they also recognized that their (partly young) followers had relatively low awareness of mediality. They did not think their followers understood that Instagram provides a media-specific staged reality, which is likely attributable to third-person-effect-like processes.

In addition, the data also reveal that SMIs construct a certain parasocial relationship with their followers. Concerning these relationships, SMIs appeared to be pursuing more interactive and reciprocal communications with their followers, e.g.:

“There is a really good exchange with me and my followers” [id105].

For instance, SMIs actively used special features provided by Instagram to contact their followers. For example, they actively and consciously asked their followers questions (e.g., via Instagram stories and question or vote functions) and expected them to answer these questions. As SMI explained:

“I ask short questions using this tool [...]. I actually always read through everything. Of course, you cannot always answer everything, but I normally read through everything” [id101].

However, the interviewees also expressed how they sought to limit or control their interactions with followers online; they also wished to avoid the impression that the interaction was one-sided (e.g., some SMIs reported that they apologized to their followers via the story function if they were unable to respond). The parasocial relationship between SMIs and followers is, therefore, not unilateral but two-sided. These parasocial relationships are consciously cultivated or conversely curbed by the SMIs for their own benefit. In doing so, SMI can decide which level of closeness they allow to their followers. Some reported that they have also developed a kind of friendship with their followers:

“Sure, a few friendships have already developed. I also did sweepstakes back in Berlin, and I also went to Fashion Week with a follower” [id108].

Others rejected too much closeness:

“With some, you talk more than with others or write a few lines more, but that’s really it. [...] I usually don’t answer messages that are too private” [id109].

Nevertheless, negative experiences play a significant role in such relationships just as they do for other personalities in the public eye, e.g.:

“Actual hatred. [...] Well, I read through all this stuff, and one negative comment, I really have to admit, influences me more than a hundred positive ones” [id110].

All SMIs respondents agreed on this point and, as such, sought to maintain appropriate content and tone not only with their followers but also among their followers. However, toxic phenomena like hate speech are difficult to avoid or extinguish here and elsewhere. In this context, one interviewee made an apt comparison:

“My channel is like my living room where I invite people. And if someone doesn’t want to be in there, they’re welcome to leave [...] I wish for respectful interaction” [id101].

5. Discussion

This paper examines how SMIs perceive their role and function as well as how they construct this role and the relationship they have with their followers. For this purpose, we conducted 15 qualitative interviews with German SMIs. The paper enriches the state of research. *First*, it enriches the usual marketing perspectives on SMIs and their monetary motives (see also, Archer and Harrigan 2016). Thus, this study showed that SMIs have different interests and goals when presenting their content to followers: On the one hand, they understand themselves as brand endorses and critically reflect about their role model function; on the other, they have commercial aims

with their account. *Second*, this study includes the SMIs' perceptive and captures their self-perceptions while previous research has more often included the audience or regulatory perception. *Third*, the study's theoretical basis provides a combination of the persuasion knowledge model (Friestad and Wright 1994) and the concept of advertising literacy (Rozendaal et al. 2011; Rozendaal, Oprea, and Buijzen 2016). This theoretical approach might be discussed more deeply and concretized for further research on this topic.

RQ1 focuses on conceptual advertising literacy as knowledge about the function of a SMI. It becomes clear that SMIs act as brand endorsers and are aware of their opinion-leading function. Yet they reject the term 'influencer' to some extent. Rather, they see themselves as advisors. They use their role and presence on SNS to increase the level of awareness of those brands with which they cooperate and for which they advertise via specially created content (e.g., Eunjin and Heather 2020; Lee and Watkins 2016). Thus, they produce advertising content and mediate advertising messages to their followers (e.g. Enke and Borchers 2018b).

Furthermore, the results demonstrate that SMIs are aware of the responsibility that comes from their self-perception as brand endorsers and advisors, especially when they address adolescents as a target group. Since they see themselves as role models and reflect about how their audience evaluates their content and thus also their persuasive messages (attitudinal advertising literacy, RQ2), they feel an obligation toward their followers. This finding is consistent with previous research, which emphasizes that SMIs can have an orientation function for adolescents (e.g., Bitkom Research 2018; Theunert and Schorb 2004; de Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson 2019). During adolescence, new agents become important and influential, orienting youth away from their parents and toward their peers – and, possibly, SMIs – in search of new role models (Kiener 2018; Steven 2018; Rotz and Tokarski 2020).

Finally, results show that SMIs act according to their knowledge and self-perception (performance advertising literacy, RQ 3). All interviewees demonstrated their social media awareness, based on which they carefully created their media persona. In doing so, they must appear authentic while still creating a kind of parallel world. This observation can be attributed to Goffman's concept of self-presentation, with its distinction between the front door presentation – what people should see – and the back door presentation – what should remain private (Goffman 1959). SMIs construct a coherent image of their profile, which shows a section of their everyday life. This is likely in recognition of the fact that followers prefer their SMIs to be authentic (Jin 2018). SMIs know that their followers may not always recognize this form of self-representation, but that they are influenced by it nonetheless. Their interaction with their followers, which is characterized by parasocial relationships on social media (Jin 2018; Jin and Muqaddam 2019), is essential to their success as SMIs (including in monetary terms). SMIs initiate this contact, but, at the same time control, and limit it to protect their own privacy.

As with all qualitative studies, the present research involved some limitations, especially its relatively small sample size. Consequently, the results of this study cannot be generalized. Besides, interviewing professional communicators, which SMIs also are by their own understanding, raises the problem of social desirability. It must also be noted that the respondents gave desired or especially positive answers to their respective job as SMIs.

There are two potential lines of future research that should be focused: a) It became clear that including the SMIs perspective on persuasive messages and role function is very valuable and thus should be considered to examine persuasion processes in more detail (e.g., Casaló, Flavián, and Ibáñez-Sánchez 2020; Enke and Borchers 2019). SMIs are neither only opinion leaders nor only brand endorsers; they also assume other communicative roles. That is why it is crucial to reconceptualize the definition of online opinion leadership, as SMIs are reshaping how – especially parasocial – opinion leadership works. This leads to b) arguing that SMIs and their followers should be thought of and researched together, especially in terms of their relationship to each other (as done, for example, by Brunick et al. 2016; Hwang and Zhang 2018; Reinikainen et al. 2020; Wulf, Schneider, and Queck 2021). In fact, the SMI phenomenon is a double-sided one, which should be considered from both sides – especially in the context of the PKM, the topic of persuasive (advertising) messages, and how they are being handled (advertising literacy dimensions). Both the target group (i.e., adolescents) and the agent (i.e., SMIs) are relevant parts of persuasive communication (Friestad and Wright 1994). Future research should take this importance into account and should consider two main issues: *First*, it should be investigated which factors influence the behavior of both SMIs and followers, for example, by taking a close look at the importance of advertising literacy. *Second*, the parasocial interactions and relationships that evolve on social media, especially those with SMIs, are an increasingly common phenomenon and warrant further research.

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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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A Path Toward a More Understandable Advertising Disclosure for Children

Conceptualizing Determining Factors for Disclosure Effectiveness and Opportunities for Future Research

Ines Spielvogel

Abstract

Children are heavily confronted with advertising messages in their media environment. Based on the emotional-based nature of contemporary advertising and children's still developing cognitive skills, young consumers are hardly able to critically cope with advertising attempts. For that children are more able to detect the persuasive intent, advertising disclosures are viewed as potential supportive measures. However, advertising disclosure effects on children's persuasion knowledge appear to be mixed. Moreover, scholars of this research field lack a concise overview about what kind of determining factors do play important roles in terms of children's persuasion knowledge activation through disclosures. The present study builds on persuasion knowledge development literature and investigates whether factors identified in this research field can be also transferred to advertising disclosures. Results of a literature review of previous disclosure research show that disclosures might need special 'features' so that advertising disclosures can be effective in children. Furthermore, not all children appear to be equally likely to grasp the meaning of disclosures. However, other individual factors than age might be more important in this context. The proposed conceptualization also identifies the environment and situation as other possible relevant factors for disclosure effectiveness. Opportunities for future research are discussed.

Wege zu einem verständlicheren, werbebezogenen Aufklärungshinweis bei Kindern. Eine Konzeptualisierung der ausschlaggebenden Faktoren für die Effektivität von Aufklärungshinweisen und Möglichkeiten für zukünftige Forschung

Zusammenfassung

Kinder sind in ihrer Medienumgebung einer Vielzahl von Werbebotschaften ausgesetzt. Insbesondere Kindern fällt es aufgrund des starken emotionalen Charakters von gegenwärtiger Werbung und den sich noch entwickelnden kognitiven Fähigkeiten schwer, Persuasionsversuche kritisch zu verarbeiten. Werbebezogene Aufklärungshinweise werden in

diesem Zusammenhang als potenzielle unterstützende Massnahmen angesehen, damit Kinder die persuasive Absicht von Werbung besser erkennen können. Die Ergebnisse zu den Auswirkungen von diesen Hinweisen auf das kindliche Persuasionswissen sind jedoch nicht eindeutig. Darüber hinaus benötigen Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftler in diesem Forschungsbereich einen präzisen Überblick darüber, welche Faktoren für die Aktivierung des kindlichen Persuasionswissens durch Hinweise ausschlaggebend sind. Die vorliegende Studie baut auf der Literatur zur Entwicklung des Persuasionswissens auf und untersucht, ob sich die Faktoren, die in diesem Forschungsbereich identifiziert wurden, auch auf werbebezogene Aufklärungshinweise übertragen lassen. Die Ergebnisse einer Literaturrecherche von bestehenden Aufklärungshinweis-Studien weisen darauf hin, dass werbebezogene Aufklärungshinweise besondere «Merkmale» erfordern, damit diese bei Kindern auch effektiv sind. Außerdem kann angenommen werden, dass nicht alle Kinder die Bedeutung der Hinweise gleichermaßen verstehen. In diesem Zusammenhang könnten jedoch andere individuelle Faktoren als das Alter ausschlaggebend sein. Die vorgeschlagene Konzeptualisierung identifiziert auch die Umwelt und die Situation als mögliche relevante Faktoren für die Wirksamkeit von werbebezogenen Aufklärungshinweisen bei Kindern. Denkbare zukünftige Forschungsbereiche werden diskutiert.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the young consumer's advertising landscape has changed intensely. Children nowadays encounter advertising messages in various advertising formats including print advertising, commercial breaks on television, product placements within television programs, sponsored content by influencers on social media, or advergames on online websites (Rideout 2014). Especially in the case of embedded advertising formats like product placement or influencer marketing, it is hard for children to react appropriately to the persuasive content. Children but also adults can have a hard time to process these messages on an elaborate level as well as to detect the persuasive intent due to its hidden and emotional-based nature (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, and Owen 2010; Nairn and Fine 2008; Rozendaal et al. 2011). Policy makers, consumer advocates, and parents are therefore concerned that embedded advertising targeted at children may result in an increased risk of undesired consequences such as parent-child conflicts, materialistic attitudes, or childhood obesity (Cain Reid 2014; Hudson, Hudson, and Peloza 2008). Against this background, a myriad of studies for instance revealed that exposure to persuasive messages embedded in entertainment media content can elicit unhealthy eating behavior in children (Auty and Lewis 2004; Brown et al. 2017; Folkvord et al. 2015; Naderer et al. 2018).

In the context of unintended advertising effects and children, advertising disclosures (e.g. 'this program contains advertising') are viewed as potential supportive measures (Hudders et al. 2017; De Jans et al. 2019). In the last decade, scholars thus

increasingly investigate whether advertising disclosures can help children to critically cope with advertising attempts by activating their persuasion knowledge (De Jans et al. 2019). However, based on the findings of de Jans et al. (2019) who comprehensively reviewed advertising papers from 2006 to 2016, advertising disclosure effects on children's knowledge of persuasion appear to be mixed. Despite this assumption, current research on persuasion knowledge still lacks a systematic literature review that focuses on advertising disclosures effects in connection with children (Boerman and van Reijmersdal 2016). In addition, we in particular lack knowledge about what kind of determining factors have been covered by previous research and which of these factors do play important roles in terms of persuasion knowledge activation and which do not.

Several studies with adults emphasize that disclosure awareness measured through disclosure recall or recognition constitute preconditions so that an advertising disclosure can have its intended effect on the activation of persuasion knowledge (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, and Neijens 2012; Boerman, Van Reijmersdal, and Neijens 2015a; 2015b). There are also initial results of the necessity of this precondition in the case of children (Boerman and van Reijmersdal 2020; van Reijmersdal et al. 2017). As previous literature suggests, however, adults have a higher capability to process persuasive messages in a more systematic manner than children do (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, and Owen 2010). This indicates that the presentation of the disclosure might need special 'features' so that advertising disclosures can effectively communicate their message and also get recognized by children. Against this background, current research revealed that compared to disclosures used in practice disclosures more appropriate for children (e.g. through the use of flashy colors and a specific wording) not only increased children's disclosure recognition, but also their understanding and liking of these cues (de Jans et al. 2018). Latest results on disclosures shown on audiovisual media targeted at all ages, however, indicate that disclosures used in practice are rather small, hardly consist of flashy colors and for the most part only contains a symbol without no further explanation (Spielvogel, Naderer, and Matthes 2020). Similar findings were found in the case of advergames targeted at children (An and Kang 2013).

In addition, not all children might be equally likely to grasp the meaning of disclosures. We therefore need to conceptualize which additional corresponding factors may be important in this context and have been identified by previous research in this field. To do so, we can build on persuasion knowledge development literature and investigate whether factors identified in this research field can be also transferred to advertising disclosures.

When children are the audience, environmental factors (e.g. family environment) are considered to play an important role for advertising effects (Hudders and Cauberghe 2018). This circumstance might also be an issue for advertising disclosure

effectiveness. Furthermore, situational factors (e.g. involvement with the media content) can influence children's brand responses (van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, and Buijzen 2012) which may also hold true when considering how children respond to advertising disclosures. When following persuasion knowledge development literature, environmental and situational factors not only explain advertising effects but also how children's knowledge of persuasion builds up (Nelson et al. 2017; Terlutter and Spielvogel 2010; Zarouali et al. 2019).

While current empirical research particularly investigates direct effects, it remains a special need to investigate in a first instance under which circumstances children are more able to activate their knowledge of persuasion when being exposed to advertising disclosures. Furthermore, it is of great importance to reveal under which circumstances children remember disclosures at their best. In short, it is imperative to specify the determining factors responsible for advertising disclosure effectiveness. With the present study, I aim to conceptualize a path toward a more understandable advertising disclosure for children. This conceptualization shall be methodically achieved by a literature review.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 *Defining Persuasion Knowledge and Dimensions of Persuasion Knowledge*

According to the *Persuasion Knowledge Model* (PKM) of Friestad and Wright (1994), persuasion knowledge refers to consumers' general knowledge and beliefs about persuasion, also including advertising-related issues. It further relates to consumers' ability to automatically retrieve and activate this knowledge. The PKM furthermore argues that, on the basis of vast practical experiences that consumers gain with persuasive attempts, our everyday knowledge of persuasion gradually develops throughout life (Friestad and Wright 1994; Wright, Friestad, and Boush 2005). In other words, our knowledge and beliefs about persuasion get more sophisticated and nuanced over time. In their theoretical essay on children's advertising processing, the authors Rozendaal et al. (2011) emphasize that this knowledge incorporates both a cognitive and affective dimension (for this distinction also see e.g. van Reijmersdal et al. 2017).

Conceptual persuasion knowledge represents the cognitive dimension and can be defined as individuals' basic understanding of persuasive attempts including embedded advertising messages (Boerman et al. 2018; Rozendaal et al. 2011). Based on various theoretical models of the child and advertising literature (for an overview, see (Wright, Friestad, and Boush 2005), this dimension includes several components such as consumer's recognition of advertising, understanding of the source,

understanding of the commercial and persuasive intent, or understanding of persuasive tactics (Rozendaal et al. 2011; Zarouali et al. 2019). In the present literature, also “conceptual advertising literacy” (e.g. van Dam and van Reijmersdal 2019) or “cognitive advertising literacy” (e.g. de Pauw, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018; Zarouali et al. 2018) heavily built upon the axioms of the PKM (Friestad and Wright 1994). In other words, these different terms basically underlie the same theoretical considerations and are operationalized by at least one of the theorized components of conceptual persuasion knowledge. Compared to persuasion knowledge, *advertising literacy* refers to advertising attempts in particular and thus excludes other sources of persuasion (De Jans et al. 2019; Zarouali et al. 2018; 2019).

Attitudinal persuasion knowledge, in contrast, represents the affective dimension of persuasion knowledge and includes skeptical thoughts about advertising as well as general negative attitudes toward advertising as the two most important components (Boerman et al. 2012; 2018; Rozendaal et al. 2011). This for instance involves critical feelings toward advertising about honesty, credibility, or trustworthiness (Boerman et al. 2018). Current research also added a moral component that refers to moral facets related to advertising such as reflections on appropriateness of advertising (Hudders et al. 2017). In the present literature, attitudinal persuasion knowledge can almost be equated with “attitudinal advertising literacy” (e.g. Hoek et al. 2020), “affective advertising literacy” (e.g. de Jans, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2018; Zarouali et al. 2018), or “evaluative persuasion knowledge” (Boerman et al. 2018). Again, these different terms underlie the same theoretical foundation.

Several scholars in this research field build on the idea of a two-dimensional persuasion knowledge because the affective dimension is regarded as highly relevant for two reasons: First, the cognitive conceptualization of conceptual persuasion knowledge alone is inadequate to illustrate the emotion-based nature of contemporary advertising targeted at children (Rozendaal et al. 2011; Hudders et al. 2016). Second, due to children’s still developing cognitive processing skills young consumers are less likely to engage in a systematic persuasion process, reducing the likelihood that their conceptual advertising knowledge gets activated (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, and Owen 2010). Furthermore, advertising research indicates that consumers’ critical feelings toward the advertised content (i.e., attitudinal persuasion knowledge) can be activated once the conceptual dimension gets triggered (Boerman et al. 2012; Boerman and van Reijmersdal 2016). This assumption is based on the “change of meaning” principle put forth by the PKM (Friestad and Wright 1994). When consumers realize that marketers try to persuade them, they will disengage from the persuasive attempt. According to the PKM, this process is defined as “detachment” (Friestad and Wright 1994). On this basis, it is further assumed that consequences of persuasion knowledge activation can also be transferred to the brand, which can lead to changes in brand evaluation or the purchase intention of the advertised brand in children (Rozendaal, Buijs, and van Reijmersdal 2016; van Reijmersdal and van Dam 2020).

2.2 *Determining Factors for the Development of Children's Persuasion Knowledge*

Previous research of the last several decades indicates that various factors are responsible for the development of children's persuasion knowledge. From a theoretical perspective, persuasion knowledge predominantly depends on both the growth of social and cognitive abilities in consumers as well as socialization processes. This circumstance is theoretically known as *consumer socialization* (John 1999; Hudders et al. 2017; Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, and Owen 2010). This subchapter introduces the most important determining factors for the development of children's advertising skills identified by previous and latest studies. In the following, these factors are sorted according to individual, environmental, and situational factors.

Individual factors

The investigation of the relationship between children's persuasion knowledge and *age* is well-established and represents the heart of most research in this field (John 1999; Lapierre 2015; Terlutter and Spielvogel 2010). When explaining the progressive understanding of advertising on age-based changes, the vast majority of previous studies theoretically build on the ideas of Piaget's model of cognitive development (Piaget 1929). These theoretical insights are also included in the model of young people's processing of commercialized media content (PCMC) developed by the authors Buijzen et al. 2010. Their model distinguishes four phases in the development of children's persuasion processing: 1) early childhood (up to 5 years old), 2) middle childhood (6 to 9 years old), 3) late childhood (10 to 12 years old), and 4) adolescence (older than 12 years). It is assumed that within each phase children collect advertising-related cognitive skills and social experience until children reach an adult-like level of these competences at the age of approximately 16 (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, and Owen 2010; John 1999). In short, research presumes that with increasing age, also individuals' knowledge of persuasion increases.

Over the past decades, several studies indicated that individuals' knowledge of persuasive communication strongly correlates with age (see, e.g. John 1999). In this light, the authors Terlutter and Spielvogel (2010) also reviewed research on influential factors for the development of children's advertising skills. Their findings showed that all included studies that deal with age have shown a positive correlation with the achievement of advertising skills. These studies, however, for the most part concentrate on traditional advertising. When it comes to contemporary advertising formats such as product placements, existing studies for instance indicate that children gain an understanding for these embedded persuasive messages around the age of 10 years (Grohs et al. 2015).

Beside this 'immutable' supporting construct, previous research identified further individual factors which might be also responsible for persuasion knowledge development in children. More specifically, it has been criticized that scholars in this

research area predominantly use age as a proxy although persuasion knowledge has been framed as a cognitive skill (Lapierre 2015). Other researchers thus investigated specific cognitive competencies (hereafter defined as ‘mutable’ supporting constructs). For instance, it was shown that the *linguistic competence* of a child serves as a driver for persuasion understanding, even when controlling for children’s age (Chernin 2007). Furthermore, Lapierre (2015) found that children who showed a better performance on measures of *Theory of Mind (ToM)* were more likely to understand the advertisers’ selling intent (but not its persuasive intent). Children with higher ToM scores had a greater knowledge of the “beliefs about someone else’s mental state” (first-order beliefs) and of the “beliefs about someone else’s mental state regarding *another* person’s mental state” (second-order beliefs; *ibid.*, 427). Other scholars also explain a delayed advertising understanding (assessed by increasing age) in part by the development of *executive function* skills (Rozendaal et al. 2011). In the case of higher developed executive function, children are more able to inhibit attention to salient perceptual cues of advertising targeted at children as well as affective responses to advertising.

Environmental and Situational Factors

Although children’s individual factors have been a focus in the research of predicting the development of persuasive understanding, environmental factors have also been object of research. The literature review of the authors Terlutter and Spielvogel (2010) on influential factors for children’s advertising skills concludes that there is also a strong influence of children’s *family environment*. This includes on the one hand the broad social environment that is primarily determined by social affiliation. On the other hand, personal relationships between parents and children which are predominantly shaped by the level of education of the parents and the parenting style might also affect persuasion knowledge activation and development. A recently published study with a focus on contemporary advertising formats showed that children’s environment significantly affects their ability to cope with embedded persuasive attempts (De Pauw, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2018). In their study, *peers* were most influential in terms of children’s conceptual and attitudinal persuasion knowledge. However, especially in the case of younger children, parents represent important social agents who positively influence the development of children’s persuasion knowledge through educating the functioning of advertising (Zarouali et al. 2019). In this light, latest published studies devote special attention to the connection between *parental advertising mediation* and children’s persuasion knowledge (De Jans et al. 2019; Hudders and Cauberghe 2018).

Another important environmental factor constitutes the *media* itself (Nelson et al. 2017). Several studies of the advertising field therefore investigated whether and how different *advertising types and characteristics* affect children’s knowledge of

persuasion. For instance, a recently published study showed that children's subsequent understanding of persuasive intent was higher for personalized social media advertising than for non-personalized ads (Daems et al. 2019). However, the investigation of how children respond to embedded advertising formats such as vlog advertising is still in its infancy (De Jans et al. 2019). In general, it is assumed that children's knowledge of understanding for contemporary advertising formats tends to be lower than for traditional formats due to its subtle and hidden nature (Verhellen et al. 2014).

Lastly, recent studies furthermore looked at how situational factors influence children's persuasion knowledge. However, to my knowledge such studies with children constitute quite a rarity compared to other investigated factors. A study on advergaming and children's persuasion knowledge found that game-related variables such as children's *experience of game flow* was positive associated with their level of persuasion knowledge (Vanwesenbeeck, Ponnet, and Walrave 2016). More specifically, children who reported being totally absorbed in the game simultaneously reported greater knowledge of the game's selling and persuasive intent. With regard to other advertising formats than advergaming where children experience an intense state of complete immersion, *involvement with the media content* might be a more appropriate variable (van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, and Buijzen 2012).

Given this overview, it gets apparent that various factors are responsible for the development of children's persuasion knowledge. However, current literature on children's persuasion processing suggests that even if children possess persuasion knowledge, they may fail to activate this knowledge while processing advertising messages (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, and Owen 2010; John 1999; Rozendaal et al. 2011). So even if specific individual, environmental, or situational factors might support the development of persuasive understanding in children, this does not automatically mean that children's knowledge gets activated when being exposed to advertising messages.

In their theoretical essay, Rozendaal et al. (2011) therefore call for a stronger emphasis of the distinction between dispositional and situational persuasion knowledge (referred to as "advertising literacy performance"). In the context of advertising, *dispositional persuasion knowledge* "can be perceived as an associative network of information nodes related to advertising" (de Jans, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018, 403). *Situational persuasion knowledge*, in contrast, refers to consumers' coping with the given persuasion tactic through knowledge activation (De Jans, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018; Ham, Nelson, and Das 2015).

2.3 Improving Children's Persuasion Knowledge Activation Through Advertising Disclosures

According to the PKM of Friestad and Wright (1994), consumers can only activate their persuasion knowledge if they recognize a persuasion attempt. Against this background, it is presumed that advertising disclosures (e.g. "this program contains advertising") can trigger persuasion knowledge as well as prevent consumers from being unconsciously persuaded since they help them to recognize advertising (De Jans et al. 2019). Several scholars thus argue that children need a cue for the upcoming advertising content (De Jans et al. 2018; De Pauw, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018; Hudders et al. 2017). Hence, the examination of how advertising disclosures affect children has become increasingly popular among scholars (De Jans et al. 2019). Latest research even seeks to provide a disclosure more suitable for children (De Jans et al. 2018). However, based on the findings of the authors de Jans et al. (2019) who comprehensively reviewed advertising papers from 2006 to 2016, advertising disclosure effects on children's persuasion knowledge appear to be mixed. Despite this assumption, current research in this area still lacks a systematic review that in particular focuses on advertising disclosures effects on persuasion knowledge in connection with children (Boerman and van Reijmersdal 2016).

RQ1: *What are the potential effects of advertising disclosures on children's persuasion knowledge?*

In addition, scholars of this research field in particular lack a 'concise' overview about what kind of determining factors do play important roles in terms of persuasion knowledge activation and which do not. Hence, one key aim of the present study is to define all determining factors that have been identified by previous experimental research in the context of advertising disclosures and children' persuasion knowledge. Furthermore, the present study aims to identify additional factors that might be important in this context. To do so, we can build on persuasion knowledge development literature and investigate whether factors identified in this research field can be also transferred to advertising disclosures.

RQ2: *What a) determining factors have been covered by previous advertising disclosure research on children and their persuasion knowledge and what b) additional factors might be important in this context?*

Though brand-related changes (e.g. brand evaluation, purchase intention of the advertised brand) can be the consequence of persuasion knowledge activation, these changes are not at the heart of the aim of advertising disclosures because "whatever the form, the purpose of the disclosure is (1) to help children recognize the commercial content and (2) to disclose its persuasive intent." (Hudders et al. 2017, 346) Disclosure effects on persuasion outcomes are thus not main object of research of the present study.

3. Method

3.1 *Research process*

To answer the research questions, a literature review was conducted. I performed an exhaustive search of published or accepted empirical studies that refer to advertising disclosures in connection with children and adolescents. In order to identify the relevant studies, I first referred to a review on advertising papers that included disclosure studies from 2011 to 2016 in connection with children. Second, I performed a keyword search of electronic databases including Google Scholar and ResearchGate. I used specific keywords to identify literature that specifically focuses on children and adolescents (e.g. “advertising disclosures children”). Lastly, I reviewed the reference lists in all papers.

Initially, a total sample of $N = 22$ studies was identified in this research context. However, some studies referring to advertising disclosures targeted at children actually investigate the influence on parents and not on children (Evans and Hoy 2016; Evans, Hoy, and Childers 2018). These studies were excluded from the sample. Furthermore, studies that do not test disclosure effects but instead refer to the appreciation of advertising disclosures were also excluded (Van Dam and van Reijmersdal 2019). This procedure led to $N = 19$ included studies. The sample size is comparable to similar analyses that have been done in this research area among adults (Boerman and van Reijmersdal 2016).

3.2 *Sample Characteristics*

The sampled studies focused on various advertising formats including social media advertising ($n= 8$), followed by product placements in television programs ($n= 5$), online website advertising ($n= 5$), traditional television advertising ($n= 3$), and print advertising ($n= 1$). The included studies also addressed different developmental stages. The investigated children of these studies had a minimum age of 5 and a maximum age of 17 and the greater part of the sampled studies included children in the age of 9 to 11 years old. Table 1 offers an overview of the included studies.

Nr.	Advertising Type	Stage of Development	Independent Variable(s)	Mediator(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent Variable(s)	Effects of Advertising Disclosures on PK*
1	Advergames	8 to 11 years	Presence of a disclosure (no disclosure vs. disclosure)	-	-	Conceptual persuasion knowledge (understanding of persuasive intent, detection of persuasive agent) / Brand outcomes (recall, preference)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↳ No main effect of use of disclosures on understanding of persuasive intent ↳ No main effect of use of disclosures on detection of persuasive agent
			Disclosure modality (visual vs. auditory vs. combined disclosure)	-	-	Conceptual persuasion knowledge (measures as in model 1) / Brand outcomes (recall, preference)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↳ No main effect of disclosure condition on conceptual PK (no differences between visual and auditory disclosure) ↳ No positive main effect of combined version (compared to visual and auditory disclosure)
2	Sponsored influencer videos	8 to 12 years	Presence of a disclosure (no disclosure vs. disclosure)	Conceptual persuasion knowledge (advertising recognition, understanding of selling intent, and understanding of persuasive intent)	Para-social relationship	Brand outcomes (recall, attitude desire)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↳ Positive main effects of the use of disclosures on all components of conceptual PK (but only among children who correctly recalled seeing the disclosure)
3	Sponsored influencer videos	9 to 11 years	Branded food product: Presence of a disclosure (no disclosure vs. disclosure); control group: Influencer marketing of a non-food product	-	-	Caloric intake of marketed snack	-
4	Personalized social media advertising	9 to 13 years	Advertising type (personalized vs. non-personalized)	Conceptual persuasion knowledge (understanding of selling intent) / Attitude toward advertising /	Presence of a disclosure (no disclosure vs. disclosure)	WOM intention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↳ The use of disclosures moderates the effect of advertising type on conceptual PK (conceptual PK for personalized ads is higher if a disclosure is present)
5	Sponsored vlogs	11 to 14 years	Presence of a disclosure (no disclosure vs. disclosure)	Para-social interaction	Peer-based advertising literacy intervention	Purchase intention	-
6	Vlog advertising	10 to 12 years	Disclosure types (platform-generated (PG) disclosure vs. no PG disclosure; influencer-generated (IG) disclosure: commercial interference disclosure vs. no commercial interference vs. no IG disclosure)			Conceptual persuasion knowledge (recognition of advertising, insight into the tactic of the brand, insight into the tactic of the influencer) / attitudinal persuasion knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↳ Positive main effects of both PG and IG disclosures on recognition of advertising ↳ Positive main effects of IG disclosure on other components of conceptual PK and attitudinal PK ↳ No main effects of PG disclosure on other components of conceptual PK and attitudinal PK

Nr.	Advertising Type	Stage of Development	Independent Variable(s)	Mediator(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent Variable(s)	Effects of Advertising Disclosures on PK*
7	Product placements and online banner advertising	6 to 12 years (eye-tracking)	Disclosure type (six disclosure designs)	-	-	Visual attention	-
		10 to 11 years (experiment)	Disclosure type (existing vs. child-inspired disclosure)	-	Advertising type	Disclosure recognition / disclosure understanding / disclosure preference / conceptual persuasion knowledge (advertising recognition)	↗Positive main effect of disclosure type on conceptual PK (<i>child-inspired disclosure increases conceptual PK compared to existing disclosure</i>)
8	Product placements	8 to 10 years	Disclosure modality (no vs. visual vs. auditory disclosure)	Conceptual persuasion knowledge (recognition of advertising, understanding of commercial source, and understanding of persuasive intent)	-	Brand attitude	↗Positive main effect of disclosure condition on conceptual PK (<i>visual and auditory disclosure increase PK compared to no disclosure; but no differences between visual and auditory disclosure</i>)
			Disclosure timing (before movie excerpt vs. during the whole movie fragment)	Conceptual persuasion knowledge (measures as in model 1)	Attitude toward ad format	Brand attitude	↗Positive main effect of disclosure condition on conceptual PK (<i>disclosure before movie excerpt increases PK</i>)
9	Advergaming	6 to 12 years	Advergame type (energy-dense snacks vs. non-food products) and presence of a disclosure (no disclosure vs. disclosure)	-	-	Caloric intake	-
10	In-vlog advertising	7 to 16 years	Presence of a disclosure (no disclosure vs. disclosure)	Conceptual persuasion knowledge (advertising recognition, understanding of commercial intent)	Dispositional persuasion knowledge / age	Brand attitude	↗No main effect of the use of disclosures on conceptual PK (<i>dispositional PK did not moderate this effect; no three-way interaction between disclosure, dispositional PK, and age on conceptual PK</i>)
			Presence of a disclosure (no disclosure vs. disclosure)	Attitudinal persuasion knowledge	Dispositional persuasion knowledge / age	Brand attitude	↗No main effect of the use of disclosures on attitudinal PK (<i>dispositional PK did not moderate this effect; no three-way interaction between disclosure, dispositional PK, and age on attitudinal PK</i>)
11	TV and print advertisement	8 to 11 years	Food health warnings	-	-	Visual attention	-

Nr.	Advertising Type	Stage of Development	Independent Variable(s)	Mediator(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent Variable(s)	Effects of Advertising Disclosures on PK*
12	Advergaming	7 to 10 years	Conceptual persuasion knowledge (understanding of commercial source and understanding of persuasive intent)	-	Presence of a disclosure (no disclosure vs. disclosure)	Purchase request	-
			Attitude toward ad format	-	Presence of a disclosure (no disclosure vs. disclosure)	Purchase request	-
13	TV advertisement	8 to 10 years	Disclosure type (no disclosure vs. commercial intent disclosure vs. manipulative intent disclosure)	Conceptual persuasion knowledge (understanding of selling intent, understanding of persuasive intent) and attitudinal persuasion knowledge	Additional prompt (no prompt vs. additional prompt)	Product desire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∩No main effects of disclosure types on conceptual PK ∩Negative indirect effect of manipulative intent disclosure on product desire compared to commercial intent and no disclosure through higher attitudinal PK
14	Product placements	6 to 11 years	Disclosure repetition (no disclosure vs. one-time disclosure vs. repeated disclosure)	Visual attention to placement	Age	Conceptual persuasion knowledge (understanding of commercial source, understanding of persuasive intent)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∩No main effect of disclosures (both repeated and one-time disclosure compared to no disclosure) on conceptual PK ∩Negative indirect effect of disclosure repetition compared to no disclosure and a one-time disclosure on conceptual persuasion knowledge through higher visual attention toward the placement (with no moderating influence of age for the relationship between visual attention and PK)
15	Product placements	9 to 15 years	Disclosure repetition (no vs. single vs. double disclosure)	-	Age	Conceptual persuasion knowledge (advertising recognition) / brand outcomes (recall, preference)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ∩Positive main effect of the use of disclosures on conceptual PK (differences between no disclosure and double disclosure; no differences between no disclosure and single disclosure) ∩Both single and double disclosures increase PK (compared to no disclosure) ∩no interaction effect of use of disclosures and age

Nr.	Advertising Type	Stage of Development	Independent Variable(s)	Mediator(s)	Moderator(s)	Dependent Variable(s)	Effects of Advertising Disclosures on PK*
16	Product placements	13 to 17 years	Presence of a disclosure (no disclosure vs. disclosure)	Conceptual persuasion knowledge (advertising recognition, understanding of persuasive intent) and attitudinal PK	-	Brand outcomes (memory, attitude toward the brand)	<p><i>↯No main effect of the use of disclosures (both 3-second disclosure and 6-second disclosure compared to no disclosure) on recognition of advertising and attitudinal PK</i></p> <p><i>↯Positive main effect of the use of disclosures on understanding of persuasive intent (but only among participants who remembered the disclosure)</i></p> <p><i>↯No indirect effects of disclosure on attitudinal PK, mediated by recognition of advertising or understanding of persuasive intent</i></p>
			Disclosure duration (no disclosure vs. 3-second vs. 6-second disclosure)	-	-	Conceptual (same measures as above) and attitudinal persuasion knowledge / brand outcomes (memory, attitude toward the brand)	<i>↯No main effect of disclosure condition on conceptual PK and attitudinal PK (also among only participants who remembered the disclosure)</i>
17	Sponsored influencer videos	10 to 13 years	Disclosure timing (no disclosure vs. prior disclosure vs. concurrent disclosure)	Visual attention to disclosure / disclosure recognition / conceptual persuasion knowledge (advertising recognition) / attitudinal persuasion knowledge	-	Brand outcomes (attitude, behavioral intention)	<p><i>↯No main effect of disclosure condition on conceptual PK</i></p> <p><i>↯Positive indirect effect of prior disclosure on PK compared to concurrent and no disclosure through higher visual attention to disclosure and disclosure recognition</i></p>
18	Sponsored influencer videos	12 to 16 years	Disclosure type (no disclosure vs. advertising disclosure vs. advertising and intent disclosure)	Conceptual persuasion knowledge (advertising recognition, understanding of persuasive intent) and attitudinal persuasion knowledge	Age	Brand outcomes (attitude, purchase intent)	<p><i>↯Positive main effect of the use of disclosures on conceptual PK (both disclosure types increase advertising recognition compared to no disclosure but no differences between disclosure types; the advertising and intent disclosure led to highest scores of understanding of persuasive intent)</i></p> <p><i>↯Interaction effect of disclosure type and age</i></p>
19	TV advertisement and website advertising	5 to 11 years	Advertising type (TV vs. website); disclosure type (no vs. low-prominent vs. high-prominent disclosure)	-	Age	Conceptual persuasion knowledge (recognition of advertising)	<p><i>↯Positive main effect of the use of disclosures on conceptual PK (but no differences between disclosure conditions)</i></p> <p><i>↯Positive main effect of age on conceptual PK (but no interaction effect of disclosures and age)</i></p>

Tab. 1.: Overview of Sampled Studies. Notes: *Persuasion knowledge. If studies include more than one model or if a publication comprises a two-study design, models are presented separately. Relevant studies, variables and significant results are marked in bold; not significant results are shown in italics.

4. Results

4.1 *Potential Advertising Disclosure Effects on Persuasion Knowledge (RQ1)*

Conceptual persuasion knowledge

A great amount of the $N = 19$ included studies concentrated on how advertising disclosures affect the activation of different components of children's conceptual persuasion knowledge ($n = 14$). These studies treated conceptual persuasion knowledge as mediator or dependent variable as well as advertising disclosures as independent variables or moderators. Table 1 specifies the components of conceptual persuasion knowledge researched within each study.

The results of these studies show that advertising disclosures only partly foster components of children's conceptual persuasion knowledge. More precisely, in several studies ($n = 6$) no main or moderating effects of the use of disclosures on components of conceptual persuasion knowledge were found (study nr. 1, nr. 10, nr. 13, nr. 14, nr. 16, nr. 17). A total of $n = 9$ studies, in contrast, perceived positive main or moderating effects of advertising disclosures on children's conceptual persuasion knowledge. These effects, however, are only limited to specific components of persuasion knowledge. In other words, most of these detected positive effects only relate to the recognition of advertising (i.e., first component of conceptual persuasion knowledge; study nr. 2, nr. 6, nr. 7, nr. 15, nr. 18, nr. 19). Furthermore, some of the included studies only found effects for other components including children's understanding of persuasive intent (study nr. 2, nr. 18, nr. 16) and selling intent (study nr. 2, nr. 4). Moreover, in two studies these effects only appeared among children who remembered seeing the disclosure (study nr. 2, nr. 16).

It has to be stressed that the measurement of these studies also differed in the number of items, meaning that some studies measured a component of conceptual persuasion knowledge with a single item (e.g. study nr. 4) while other studies depicted a specific component through several items (e.g. study nr. 2). Furthermore, a great amount of the $N = 19$ sampled studies used an index for conceptual persuasion knowledge that summarized several components. This also includes one study which revealed a positive effect of the use of disclosures on children's conceptual knowledge of persuasion (study nr. 8). It has to be pointed out that the use of such 'partial' and different measurements for conceptual knowledge (see e.g. Boerman et al. 2018) of course makes it more difficult to make a clear statement on how advertising disclosures affect children's conceptual persuasion knowledge.

Besides, some individual studies also revealed indirect effects of advertising disclosures on components of children's conceptual persuasion knowledge (study nr. 14, nr. 17). These indirect effects of disclosures on children's knowledge of persuasion

were mediated by the extent of children's visual attention toward the subsequently placed brand placement (study nr. 14) as well as by children's visual attention toward the disclosure and disclosure recognition as a serial mediator (study nr. 17). Whether these indirect effects turned out to be positive (study nr. 17) or negative (study nr. 14) was contingent upon specific disclosure characteristics and thus determining factors.

Attitudinal persuasion knowledge

Some of the sampled studies ($n = 6$) also paid special attention to children's attitudinal persuasion knowledge (study nr. 6, nr. 10, nr. 13, nr. 16, nr. 17, nr. 18). The authors (Hoek et al. 2020)(study nr. 10) revealed no main effects of the use of disclosures on children's attitudinal persuasion knowledge. Also, in the study of (Rozendaal, Buijs, and van Reijmersdal 2016) (study nr. 13) no disclosure effects for attitudinal persuasion knowledge were found. Instead, children's attitudinal persuasion knowledge served as a mediator for the effect of disclosure condition on product desire. Furthermore, the authors (van Reijmersdal et al. 2017) (study nr. 16) investigated whether children's conceptual persuasion knowledge (assessed by recognition of advertising and understanding of persuasive intent) mediates the effect of the use of disclosures on attitudinal persuasion knowledge. However, their analyses showed no indirect effects. Moreover, results of one recently published study by (van Reijmersdal and van Dam 2020) (study nr. 18) did not indicate that children's higher conceptual persuasion knowledge is automatically associated with higher attitudinal persuasion knowledge. However, depending on disclosure type children's advertising recognition and understanding of persuasive intent (i.e., conceptual persuasion knowledge) improved in children of later developmental stages (middle adolescent), ultimately resulting in higher attitudinal persuasion knowledge. In contrast, children who belong to earlier developmental stages (early adolescent) remained unaffected. Also, recent findings of de Jans and Hudders (2020) (study nr. 6) revealed that children's attitudinal persuasion knowledge (assessed by their skepticism toward the ad) was more activated when the influencer disclosed that there was a commercial interference of the brand compared to no commercial interference disclosure (but not compared to no influencer generated disclosure). These results again highlight that determining factors might be responsible for the emergence of advertising disclosure effects.

4.2 Determining Factors for Advertising Disclosure Effects on Persuasion Knowledge (RQ2)

As described above, literature on persuasion knowledge suggests the presence of factors that can speed up or even inhibit the process of persuasion knowledge activation and development in children. These determining factors can be divided into individual, environmental, and situational factors. When examining determining factors for advertising disclosure effects on children's persuasion knowledge, we can build on existing persuasion knowledge literature and investigate whether factors identified in this research field can be also transferred to the context of advertising disclosures. Prior to that, we can detect additional factors which also received scientific attention in this research field (RQ2a). The results of the literature review are presented below according to the respective factors.

Advertising disclosures factors

While current empirical research on advertising disclosures in connection with children so far largely investigated direct effects (i.e., including both brand-related outcomes and effects on children's knowledge of persuasion), some of the sampled studies also started to examine what kind of determining factors lead to advertising disclosure effects. This includes at first instance *advertising disclosures factors* ($n = 11$). However, half of these studies revealed no effects of advertising disclosure factors on children's persuasion knowledge. This includes disclosure modality (study nr. 1), disclosure type (study nr. 13, nr. 18, nr. 19), and disclosure duration (study nr. 16). Other studies showed that specific advertising disclosures factors can affect children's knowledge of persuasion both in a direct (study nr. 6, nr. 7, nr. 8, nr. 15, nr. 18) and indirect way (study nr. 14, nr. 17).

When starting with the direct effects, the authors (De Jans et al. 2018) (study 7) revealed that depending on disclosure type children's level of persuasion knowledge differed. More specifically, a self-created disclosure suitable for children (through the use of flashy colors and other wording based on cocreation workshops with children) increased children's conceptual persuasion knowledge compared to the existing disclosure as currently used in practice. Furthermore, a study published by the authors (van Reijmersdal and van Dam 2020) (study 18) showed that both investigated disclosure types ("only advertising" disclosure versus "advertising and intent" disclosure) increased children's advertising recognition compared to no disclosure. However, the authors found differences between the two types of disclosures only for another component of conceptual persuasion knowledge. More precisely, the "advertising and intent" disclosure led to the highest scores in children's understanding of persuasive intent compared to the "only advertising" disclosure and no disclosure. This effect between the disclosure types was not found for children's advertising recognition.

Moreover, a study of de Pauw and colleagues (2018) (study 8) indicated that disclosure modality and disclosure timing can affect children's conceptual persuasion knowledge. Their empirical findings suggest that both a visual and auditory disclosure increase children's knowledge of persuasion compared to no disclosure. However, no differences between visual and auditory disclosure were found. Regarding disclosure timing, an advertising disclosure shown before the movie excerpt started significantly increased young consumer's persuasion knowledge compared to an advertising disclosure cue shown during the movie excerpt (De Pauw, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018). Additionally, a study on disclosure repetition (study 15) indicated that the presence of disclosures can lead to an increase in children's recognition of advertising compared to no disclosure (Uribe and Fuentes-García 2019). The authors also found that advertising recognition was higher for double disclosures than for single disclosures.

As stated above, individual studies also revealed indirect effects of advertising disclosures on components of children's conceptual persuasion knowledge (study nr. 14, nr. 17). However, whether these indirect effects appeared was contingent upon disclosure repetition and disclosure timing. Regarding the latter, the authors (van Reijmersdal et al. 2020) (study nr. 17) revealed a positive indirect effect of disclosures shown prior the branded content on children's level of conceptual persuasion knowledge compared to disclosures shown concurrent with branded content and no disclosures. This effect was mediated by higher levels of visual attention toward the disclosure as well as by higher levels of disclosure recognition (serial mediator). In terms of disclosure repetition, the authors (Spielvogel, Naderer, and Matthes 2019) (study nr. 14) showed that, through higher levels of visual attention toward the subsequent placement, repeated disclosures negatively affected children's conceptual persuasion knowledge compared to one-time disclosures and no disclosures.

Individual factors

When examining determining factors for the effects of advertising disclosures on children's persuasion knowledge, not only advertising disclosures factors but also *individual factors* have been subject of investigation ($n = 5$). More specifically, the moderating influence of children's age has been examined in these studies. However, the majority of previous studies found no moderating influence of age for the direct or indirect effects of advertising disclosures on children's knowledge of persuasion (study nr. 10, nr. 14, nr. 15, nr. 19). In contrast, results of only one recently published study of the authors (van Reijmersdal and van Dam 2020) (study nr. 18) revealed significant interaction effects. Based on their findings, both of their investigated disclosure types (disclosure "advertising" versus "disclosure of advertising and intent") can increase conceptual persuasion knowledge among middle adolescents. In the case of early adolescents, however, only "advertising and intent" disclosures are able

to improve their knowledge of persuasion. Hence, only a more detailed disclosure appears to be effective to alert younger adolescents that the upcoming YouTube video of an influencer contains advertising.

Environmental and situational factors

Surprisingly, none of the sampled studies investigated the moderating influence of environmental and situational factors for the effect of disclosure presence on children’s knowledge of persuasion. To my knowledge, merely one study so far examined the moderating influence of para-social relationship with the influencer (study nr. 2) but for the effect of conceptual persuasion knowledge on brand-related outcomes.

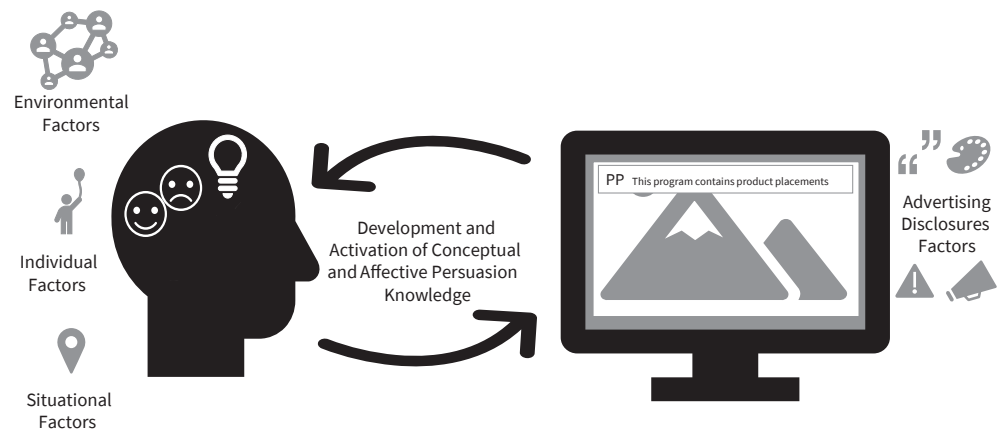


Fig. 1.: Conceptual Model.

Figure 1 visualizes the conceptual model of the present study. The conceptualization is based on what determining factors have been covered by previous advertising disclosure research in connection with children (i.e., advertising disclosures factors and individual factors). It further includes factors retrieved from persuasion knowledge development literature that might also be responsible for advertising disclosure effectiveness in children (i.e., environmental and situational factors). Their potential role for a more understandable disclosure for children will be discussed in the following chapter (RQ2b). In addition, other potential factors that could be important in this context but have not received any scientific attention at this time are discussed. This offers opportunities for future research.

5. Discussion

Based on the results of the literature review, a great part of previous empirical research on advertising disclosures and children focused on persuasion outcomes and thus direct effects. This also includes the activation of persuasion knowledge in

terms of the brand to which children are exposed to. It follows that it remains unclear what factors might be especially important in this context and potential moderators.

5.1 Advertising Disclosures Factors

Previous findings for advertising disclosures factors in connection with children appear to be mixed and insufficient. Half of these studies revealed no effects of advertising disclosure factors on children's persuasion knowledge. Other studies showed that specific advertising disclosures factors can affect children's knowledge of persuasion, including disclosure type and content, modality, timing, and repetition. These factors thus seem to play important roles for that advertising disclosures can effectively communicate their message and merit more attention of scholars in the future (De Jans et al. 2019).

While a great part of advertising disclosure factors examined were theoretically derived from disclosure studies with adults (van Reijmersdal et al. 2017), other factors such as the repetition of advertising disclosures were found to be especially relevant in connection with children (Spielvogel, Naderer, and Matthes 2019; Uribe and Fuentes-García 2019). We therefore need to specify other advertising disclosures factors that might be relevant for young consumers. Against this background, the authors de Jans et al. (2018) aimed to create an advertising disclosure more suitable for children. By doing so, they paid special attention to the visual appearance of the disclosure. Based on cocreation workshops with children, an eye-tracking study tested various disclosure designs which differed in their *visual appearance* (e.g. color, font size) and *format* (e.g. symbols, exclamation marks). Future research is highly encouraged to test additional visual appearances more suitable for children. Furthermore, it is recommendable to test how the visual appearance of various advertising disclosures not only affects children's visual attention but also children's disclosure awareness, disclosure understanding, and in the last instance their knowledge of persuasion. Special focus should be given to *symbols*, especially when it comes to young children whose reading skills are still developing.

5.2 Individual Factors

In terms of individual factors, it gets apparent that previous advertising disclosure studies in connection with children build on persuasion knowledge development research. In other words, it is assumed that individual factors such as age do not only directly improve children's knowledge of persuasion but also moderate advertising disclosures effects on persuasion knowledge activation. However, in most of the included studies the effect of advertising disclosures on children's knowledge of persuasion was not contingent on young consumers' developmental stages.

Despite this fact, other individual factors than children's age have received little to no attention by scholars in this research field. Age as a crucial factor for persuasion knowledge development might be less important than previously theorized (Lapierre 2017), especially in the case of contemporary advertising targeted at children (Nairn and Fine 2008). Therefore, other determining individual factors than children's age might be very relevant for the success of an advertising disclosure in the sense of being both more understandable and effective for children.

One advice for future research is to focus more on 'mutable' supporting constructs than on 'immutable' supporting constructs such as age. This advice builds on literature on persuasion knowledge development. It is criticized that scholars predominantly use age as a proxy although persuasion knowledge has been framed as a cognitive skill (Lapierre 2015). When it comes to the question which individual factors support or reduce the effectiveness of advertising disclosures in children, other factors should thus be examined. For instance, to my knowledge no study so far considered the moderating role of children's *reading skills* when testing disclosure effectiveness. While linguistic competence might be an important factor to consider for the development of persuasion knowledge in children (Chernin 2007), reading ability might be even more important for disclosure effectiveness. While consumer's reading ability is not a necessity for the recognition of branded content, the wording of advertising disclosures currently used in practice often comprises full sentences (e.g. "PP – This program contains product placement") or only signal words (e.g. "PP – product placement"; see Spielvogel, Naderer, and Matthes 2020). This highlights that various advertising disclosures call for full developed reading skills in consumers and in some cases symbol comprehension when only using an abbreviation (e.g. "PP").

Inspired by the authors (Boerman, Van Reijmersdal, and Neijens 2015a), another potential influential factor might be children's *disclosure familiarity*. In their study, adult consumers who were familiar with the use of advertising disclosures also increased the chance that the disclosure was recognized. To my knowledge, this potential moderating influence has not yet been studied with children. However, if children are frequently exposed to advertising disclosures and are thus familiar with these cues, this might also increase the chance that children are more aware of disclosures.

5.3 Environmental and Situational Factors

Compared to the listed factors above, determining factors that take the environment and situation into account constitute a dearth of research in this research field. However, especially when it comes to children, environmental factors such as their family environment are viewed as relevant influencing factors for both advertising effects

(Hudders and Cauberghe 2018) and the development of children's advertising skills (Nelson et al. 2017; Terlutter and Spielvogel 2010). This might also be the case for advertising disclosure effects. Furthermore, situational factors such as the amount of visual attention that consumers pay toward the respective area of interest might not only be relevant for advertising effects but also for advertising disclosure effects. Eye-tracking studies in this context already showed that children's amount of visual attention serve as important mediators for the effect of advertising disclosures on children's conceptual persuasion knowledge (Spielvogel, Naderer, and Matthes 2019; van Reijmersdal et al. 2020). However, moderating situational influences have not been subject of research so far.

This circumstance could, however, neglect significant influencing factors for advertising disclosure effects. Another potential influential factor that takes situational aspects into account is consumer's *involvement with the media content*. There is empirical evidence for that adult viewers who are highly involved with the media content are also less likely to remember the disclosure (Boerman, Van Reijmersdal, and Neijens 2015a). The authors conclude that the more viewers engage with a plot, the less cognitive resources remain for disclosure processing. Future research could also examine this assumption with children, for example by manipulating involvement (Matthes, Schemer, and Wirth 2007). When it comes to more contemporary advertising formats such as advergames, children's *experience of game flow* might not only be positively associated with persuasion knowledge (Vanwesenbeeck, Ponnet, and Walrave 2016) but also explain advertising disclosure effects.

5.4 The Important Role of Disclosure Awareness

Finally, it has to be pointed out that the results of two sampled studies indicated that advertising disclosures affect several components of conceptual persuasion knowledge *only* among children who correctly remembered seeing the disclosure (Boerman and van Reijmersdal 2020; van Reijmersdal et al. 2017). Furthermore, disclosure recognition appears to serve as an mediator for the effect of advertising disclosures on children's persuasion knowledge (van Reijmersdal et al. 2020). These results highlight that *disclosure awareness* constitute a precondition so that an advertising disclosure can have its intended effect on the activation of persuasion knowledge. Studies with adults also emphasized the necessity of disclosure awareness for advertising disclosure effects (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, and Neijens 2012; Boerman, Van Reijmersdal, and Neijens 2015a; 2015b). Future research should therefore consider disclosure awareness more intensively.

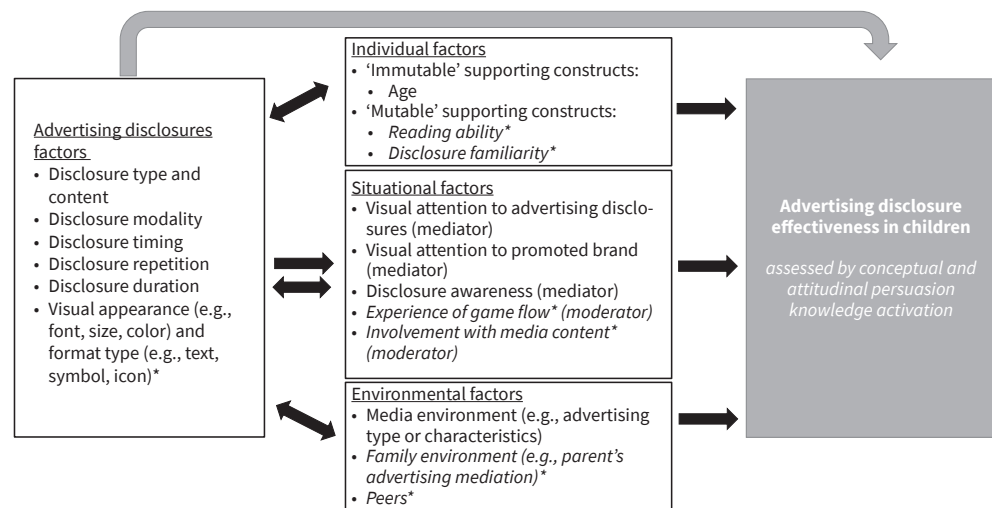


Fig. 2.: Overview of Potential Determining Factors for Advertising Disclosures Effectiveness in Children.

Figure 2 summarizes the findings and gives an overview of potential determining factors for advertising disclosures effectiveness in children (assessed by conceptual and attitudinal persuasion knowledge activation). Based on the findings of the literature review of advertising disclosure studies in connection with children, there is a scientific focus on direct effects (grey arrow). Furthermore, Figure 2 visualizes all determining factors that have been covered by previous research in this field (marked in bold). Furthermore, it contains additional identified factors that might be important in this context (both marked in bold and shown in italics). Moreover, it is assumed that some factors do interact with each other (double-headed arrows). Against this background, several studies paid attention to interaction effects of advertising disclosures (factors) and age on children's knowledge of persuasion (e.g. Hoek et al. 2020). Interestingly, one study investigated the interaction between advertising type and the use of disclosures on children's persuasion knowledge (Daems et al. 2019). Although the authors did not examine specific advertising disclosure characteristics, they paid attention to the interplay of disclosures and environmental factors and how this interaction affects children's knowledge of persuasion. Moreover, situational factors such as the amount of visual attention children pay to the commercial are viewed as important mediators for the effects of disclosures on children's persuasion knowledge (Spielvogel, Naderer, and Matthes 2019). However, situational factors may not only constitute mediators but also may moderate the effect of advertising disclosures (factors) on children's persuasion knowledge. In this light, the authors Vanwesenbeeck and colleagues (2016) for instance showed that children's experience of game flow was positively associated with children's knowledge of persuasion.

6. Conclusion

The present study delivers several scientific implications. In sum, the findings of the literature review indicate that advertising disclosures only partly foster components of children's conceptual persuasion knowledge. That is, some studies revealed positive effects while other found no effects at all. These derived effects, however, are only limited to specific components of persuasion knowledge (i.e., mostly the first component of conceptual persuasion knowledge, namely recognition of advertising). When considering the findings for both conceptual and attitudinal persuasion knowledge, it also gets apparent that determining factors might be responsible for the emergence of advertising disclosure effects.

Above all, future research is highly encouraged to pay more attention to the investigation of determining factors than solely testing direct effects. Thereby, scholars can build on and expand the proposed conceptualization of determining factors of the present study. Additionally, it is imperative to provide empirical evidence for the additional factors theoretically derived and proposed by the present study. All of these efforts enable us to develop a more effective and understandable advertising disclosure for children.

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