

# Improving minor's advertising literacy by 'cueing'

A report in the framework of the AdLit SBO research project



This document forms part of the 'AdLit' (Advertising Literacy) research project. AdLit is a four-year interdisciplinary research project on advertising literacy, which is funded by VLAIO (Flanders Innovation & Entrepreneurship). The main goal of the AdLit project is to investigate how we can empower children and youth to cope with advertising, so that they can grow up to be critical, informed consumers who make their own conscious choices in today's new media environment.

The AdLit consortium comprises of the following partners:

University of Ghent: Research group CEPEC and Department Education

University of Antwerp: Research group MIOS and Department Marketing

KU Leuven: Research group Centre for IT and IP Law (CiTiP)

Free University Brussels: Research group CEMESO

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**In cooperation with the AdLit consortium**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**AIM.** It has been argued that a (sponsorship) disclosure cue (e.g. a logo or symbol) should be used to indicate when a persuasive attempt is being shown, or is about to occur. This cue could then trigger advertising awareness among children, which could lead to more critical reflection about the ads they are exposed to. This research document further elaborates on the importance and effectiveness of disclosure cues.

**METHODOLOGY.** This report is the result of a desk research.

**RESULTS.** This research report reveals that it is essential to communicate the meaning of an advertising cue and to make clear how it works and for what reason it is implemented. Further, a disclosure cue's effectiveness also depends on its characteristics, such as wording, shape, color etc.

**EMPIRICAL STUDIES .**

To date, two articles have been written within the AdLit consortium about the use of disclosure cues in advertising:

Zarouali, B., Ponnet, K., Walrave, M., & Poels, K. (2017). "Do you like cookies?" Adolescents' skeptical processing of retargeted Facebook-ads and the moderating role of privacy concern and a textual debriefing. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 69, 157-165.

De Pauw, P., Hudders, L., & Cauberghe, V. (Forthcoming). Disclosing brand placement to children *International Journal of Advertising*.

Further research within the AdLit project will work on determining the most effective disclosure cue modalities by conducting additional experimental research.

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# 1. Introduction

Nowadays, children are dealing with a media environment full of (online) advertising (Calvert, 2008). For children to defend themselves against such ads, having some degree of advertising literacy is considered to be a prerequisite in most research. However, it has been argued that possessing advertising knowledge does not automatically enable minors to defend themselves against advertising (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Rozendaal, Lapierre, Van Reijmersdal, & Buijzen, 2011). Even if children have the required advertising knowledge, it does not necessarily follow that they will also retrieve this knowledge when confronted with advertising and apply it as a critical defense (Rozendaal, Slot, van Reijmersdal, & Buijzen, 2013). In other words, there is an important difference between possessing advertising knowledge and actually using and applying it on the appropriate moment, i.e. when exposed to commercial content. This might particularly be the case for hybrid and embedded advertising formats (e.g. advergames), which are usually fun and immersive, and therefore dampen children's ability and motivation to subject the integrated commercial content to critical reflection (Rozendaal et al., 2011). Therefore, it has been argued that a (sponsorship) disclosure cue (e.g. a logo or symbol) should be used to indicate when a persuasive attempt is being shown, or is about to occur. This cue could then trigger advertising awareness among children, which could lead to more critical reflection about the ads they are exposed to. The next section digs deeper into the importance of such cues.

## 2. The importance of a disclosure cue

In this section, three topics are addressed that indicate the need for a cue to trigger children's advertising literacy for contemporary advertising formats: 1) the different nature of new interactive advertising formats, 2) children's depiction as cued processors, and 3) the current legal framework regarding such cues. The resulting paragraphs should provide a roadmap in understanding the urgent need for a disclosure cue in a hybrid advertising environment from three important perspectives.

### 2.1. THE DIFFERENT NATURE OF TODAY'S ADVERTISING FORMATS

As already mentioned in the introduction, it is necessary that children also apply their current advertising knowledge if the goal is to generate critical thoughts and counterarguments when being exposed to a commercial message. This is especially the case for new, nontraditional advertising formats, for several reasons. In particular, these new formats are known for having commercial content embedded in television programs, films, editorial content (e.g. advergames), video games, etc. (Calvert, 2008). In other words, these nontraditional advertising techniques are characterized by an integration of persuasive, commercial messages into entertaining (and often

interactive) content, resulting in blurred boundaries between advertising, entertainment and information (Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, & Buijzen, 2012). Due to this embedded and subtle nature of contemporary advertising, combined with children's underdeveloped persuasion knowledge and limited experience with these new advertising formats, young children have more difficulties retrieving and applying their advertising knowledge as a critical defense when confronted with this nontraditional advertising (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, & Owen, 2010; Panic, Cauberghe, & De Pelsmacker, 2013).

Furthermore, compared to traditional advertising, most of the current advertising practices are affect-based: Wicks et al. (2010) revealed that child-directed advertising entails significantly more emotional appeals and production techniques striving to capture the attention of younger children. It is assumed that such advertising leads children to process these messages under conditions of low elaboration (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, & Owen, 2010; Livingstone & Helsper, 2006), as the emotional and entertaining content distracts children from processing advertising in a critical way. In other words, the affect-based nature of these advertising practices is likely to limit children's motivation and ability to process an advertising message elaborately and, accordingly, to apply their advertising knowledge as a protective mechanism (Rozendaal et al., 2011). Based on this line of reasoning, it is assumed that children have more difficulties with critically reflecting (i.e. using their advertising knowledge) on contemporary advertising formats spontaneously, due to their different nature (affect-based and embedded). Therefore, it has been argued that advertising literacy can be more successful in reducing children's susceptibility to advertising effects when they are triggered to use this knowledge by a disclosure cue (An & Stern, 2011; Roedder, 1981; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2012).

## 2.2. CHILDREN AS 'CUED PROCESSORS'

In the literature of consumer socialization, children have been labeled as "cued processors," due to their need of a cue to trigger their persuasion knowledge (Brucks, Armstrong, & Goldberg, 1988; Roedder, 1981). This implies that they can only apply advertising literacy when they are helped or encouraged to think about the advertising they have seen, or are about to see. In other words, it is assumed that children do not automatically use their advertising knowledge during a persuasive exposure but must be cued to do so (John, 1999). This theory is corroborated by the findings of Campbell and Kirmani (2000), who showed that the accessibility of a persuasive motive is an important predictor of the activation of a person's persuasion knowledge. Therefore, from a consumer socialization point-of-view, a well-designed cue should make the commercial motives of advertising more accessible in the minds of children, and hence, stimulate them to activate and use their persuasion knowledge (An & Stern, 2011).

### 3. The legal perspective

From a legal perspective, a disclosure cue has been suggested in order to meet certain codes concerning the issue of advertising aimed at children. More specifically, legislative and self-regulatory principles (e.g. ICC-code, FEDMA European Code, CARU, etc.) formulate that marketing communication messages should be clearly distinguishable ‘as such’, whatever their form and whatever the medium used. Put differently, advertising should be portrayed in such a way that it is readily recognizable and that the identity of the advertiser is also apparent (Verdoodt, Lambrecht, & Lievens, 2016). For instance, the Children’s Advertising Review Unit (CARU), a U.S. self-regulatory organization for the promotion of responsible and ethical advertising to children under the age of 12 in all media, released some guidelines concerning the blurring of advertising and editorial/program content. CARU states: “On websites directed to children, if an advertiser integrates an advertisement into the content of a game or activity, then the advertiser should make clear, in a manner that will be easily understood by the intended audience, that it is an advertisement” (CARU, 2009). However, in today’s advertising landscape, with all the subtle and embedded forms of advertising, the latter is not always the case. Therefore, different actors, backed by legal support, have urged to introduce a disclosure cue (e.g. logo or symbol) that clearly indicates when advertising content is being shown online.

In summary, we have argued that a disclosure cue is necessary and important for advertising aimed at children. However, an important question remains to be addressed: are these cues effective in triggering advertising literacy? To answer this question, we will discuss the empirical body of literature dealing with the effectiveness of advertising cues.

### 4. The effectiveness of disclosure cues

In the past, some research has been conducted on program/commercial separation devices as a cue to help children recognize advertising content. Most children’s television shows include such devices (e.g., “we’ll be right back after the break”) whenever a commercial break occurs (Kunkel et al., 2004). However, studies show mixed results with regard to their effectiveness. Although Ward, Wackman & Wartella (1977) found these bumpers to be effective for children in distinguishing television programs and commercials, many others concluded that these cues generally do not help children to recognize advertising content (Butter, Popovich, Stackhouse, & Garner, 1981; Palmer & McDowell, 1979; Stutta & Hunnicutt, 1987; Stutts, Vance, & Hudleson, 1981). In other words, program/commercial separation cues are found to be largely ineffective in helping children to distinguish commercials from programs.

Concerning the broader concept of persuasion knowledge, academic research devoted to the effect of cues in activating this knowledge among children is, surprisingly enough, limited. Early research from Brucks, Armstrong and Goldberg (1988) showed that persuasion knowledge did not result in increased counterarguments against advertising unless a cue was present to activate that knowledge. In other words, only when presented with a cue to activate their persuasion knowledge children were able to generate critical thoughts about advertising.

Recently, disclosure cues in advertising have regained some academic attention, but these results are far from univocal.

Research conducted among adults generally shows that disclosures cues are effective in activating persuasion knowledge and altering intended advertising effects (mostly in the context of brand placement). In particular, some studies show that these cues can directly temper an increase in brand recall and attitudes (Campbell, Mohr, & Verlegh, 2012; van Reijmersdal, Lammers, Rozendaal, & Buijzen, 2015) and product claim acceptance (Dekker & van Reijmersdal, 2013). Other studies demonstrate that cues have a mitigating influence on brand placement effects (e.g. brand attitude and purchase intention) via persuasion knowledge. However, these results are not straightforward. For example, it was shown that an advertising cue does not activate critical attitudes toward brand placement (van Reijmersdal, Tutaj, & Boerman, 2013). In addition, the study of Tessitore and Geuens (2013) showed that an advertising cue was only effective in activating persuasion knowledge and decreasing advertising effects when a training was added before exposure to the advertising.

With regard to children, however, cues seem to be less effective, at least in activating children's persuasion knowledge for advergames (see An & Stern, 2011; Panic, Cauberghe, & De Pelsmacker, 2013). Advertising cues did seem to be effective in mitigating advertising effects (An & Stern, 2011; Panic et al., 2013). Advergames, however, might be an exceptionally challenging format, as the context in which the commercial content is embedded is not only entertaining but also interactive. A recent study (De Pauw et al., forthcoming) indeed shows that cues are more promising when disclosing brand placement, i.e. when it comes to triggering persuasion knowledge – the effect of the latter on brand attitudes is less straightforward. Nonetheless, academic research on this topic remains underdeveloped, certainly in entertaining and interactive advertising environments with children and adolescents as a target group. Therefore, future research efforts are to be encouraged in order to gain a more comprehensive base of knowledge on the effectiveness of disclosure cues in activating children's advertising literacy and mitigating advertising effects.

## 5. Disclosure cue: different forms

When conducting research on disclosure cues, it is important to note that these cues can take various forms. An and Stern (2009) argued that a cue's 'ineffectiveness may be explained by a variety of shortcomings in the placement, wording, and content of the ad break itself' (p. 51). This statement indicates that the characteristics of a cue itself appear to be crucial, rather than the presence or absence of them (An & Kang, 2013). An and Kang (2013, 2014) conducted two studies to analyze the format, content and characteristics of existing advertising cues interrupting advergames and showed that these cues revealed problems of low visibility and readability. Therefore, it is important to study the effects of disclosure cues with the greatest attention for its specific features. A cue with the 'right' characteristics could function as the optimal trigger to incite children to use their advertising knowledge when encountering ads. In the next paragraphs, possible variations in disclosure cues will be discussed according to four criteria (following An & Kang, 2013): (1) format of a cue; (2) characteristics of a cue; (3) exposure time of a cue; and (4) the semantic content of a cue.



First, a disclosure cue can assume various formats. They can be presented as pre-warnings (e.g. an announcement at the beginning of the commercial break, stating “this is advertising”), icons (e.g. PP-logo in Belgium to announce product placement, or PEGI-ratings on videogames), or overlays in online content warning consumers that the content they are about to watch is commercially loaded. As these examples illustrate, the format of a disclosure cue mostly depends on the medium in which the cue will be displayed. Furthermore, it also depends on the advertising format, as a particular ad format may require a specific disclosure format.

Second, the characteristics of disclosure cues can differ on a number of aspects. It goes from color, shape, size and orientation to interactivity, vividness and the dynamic nature. In this regard, it is crucial to find the right combination of characteristics that enhances the activation of advertising literacy to the greatest extent. According to the dual coding theory, simultaneous use of different modalities of a cue may certainly enhance a more thorough processing of cue information (An & Kang, 2013). Especially for children, a group with limited cognitive resources, a cue should have the right set of characteristics in order to facilitate the recognition and processing of the disclosure cue.

Third, the exposure time of the audience to the advertising cue is important. Belgian legislation, for instance, requires the current logo to be shown for at least five seconds, but this is often regarded as too short. Based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979), cues which are not noticed or sufficiently processed by the audience, will fail to activate their advertising literacy. Especially for young media users, this will result in difficulties to distinguish commercial content from media content. Therefore, in order to develop an effective advertising cue, it is essential to determine the optimal presentation duration of the cue on the screen. In their study, Boerman, van Reijmersdal and Neijens (2012) found that different sponsorship disclosure durations on television had a different effect on viewers’ advertising literacy and brand responses. They specifically showed that a 6-second disclosure was more effective in activating persuasion knowledge than a 3-second disclosure. However, the respondents used in this study were college students, and the results might be different for children. For them the exposure time to the advertising cue may even need to be longer to be effective.

Finally, the semantic content of a cue refers to the text that appears in or around a disclosure cue (which is not always the case). The latter can also imply certain text attributes, such as text style and size. It has been argued that warnings like ‘This is advertising’ is more likely to be comprehended by children than statements like ‘And now, a word from our sponsors’ or ‘See you after the break’ (An & Stern, 2011). When the vocabulary in cues is not adjusted to that of minors and is, for instance, too complicated (e.g., ‘The games and other activities on this website include messages about the products Kraft sells’), it can be expected that these cues will miss their goal (An & Stern, 2011). Other studies examined the effectiveness of cues disclosing the advertising’s intent. Rozendaal, Buijs and van Reijmersdal (2016) for example showed that only the warning of manipulative intent (‘Now it’s time for the commercials, but pay attention: commercials are not always fair, sometimes they tell things that are untrue.’) activated children’s advertising literacy and subsequently decreased advertising effects.

The warning of commercial intent ('Now it's time for the commercials, but pay attention: commercials want you to like and buy their products.') did not strengthen children's advertising defenses.

## 6. AdLit and disclosure cue studies

As mentioned above, more research is necessary on how disclosure cues can assist in children's and teenagers' advertising literacy. To date, two articles on disclosure cues have been written within the AdLit framework. Abstracts to both articles are available at the [www.AdLit.be](http://www.AdLit.be) and can also be found below

To further study advertising literacy and the use of disclosure cues, other experimental studies are still ongoing within the AdLit project, including one study developing a new disclosure cue based on co-creation sessions and eye tracking. The results of these studies are expected by the end of 2017 and will be available on the project's website.

### *Disclosing brand placement to young children*

*This study was written by De Pauw P., Hudders L. and Cauberghe V. and is accepted for publication in International Journal of Advertising.*

**Abstract.** In spite of the EU's prohibition on brand placement in children's programs, it is argued that children may still be exposed to this advertising format in many occasions. Consequently, and as children may have even more difficulties than adults to distinguish the commercial content from the editorial media content in which it is embedded, an advertising disclosure may be necessary to enable them to cope with brand placement. Entailing two one-factorial between-subjects experiments, the current article examined how different types of brand placement warning cues influenced cognitive advertising literacy and the attitude toward the placed brand, among children between 8 and 10 years old.

In a first study, it was investigated how these outcomes were influenced by warning cues with different perceptual modalities (no vs. auditory vs. visual cue, N = 98). The results showed that a visual warning cue was more effective than an auditory warning cue (vs. no warning cue) in addressing cognitive advertising literacy. However, this higher cognitive advertising literacy could not account for the effect of the visual warning cue on brand attitude.

In a second study, it was examined whether the effectiveness of this visual warning cue was influenced by the timing of disclosure (cue prior to vs. during media containing brand placement, N = 142). Additionally, it was tested whether the effect of the cue on brand attitude could be explained by cognitive advertising literacy if children's skeptical attitude toward the brand placement format was taken into account. The results showed that cognitive advertising literacy was higher when the cue was shown prior to than during the media content. This cue-influenced cognitive advertising literacy resulted in a more positive brand attitude, but only among

children who were less skeptical toward brand placement. This positive relation disappeared among moderately and highly skeptical children. These findings have significant theoretical, practical and social implications.

### *“Do you like cookies?” Adolescents' skeptical processing of retargeted Facebook-ads and the moderating role of privacy concern and a textual debriefing*

*This study was written by Zarouali B., Ponnet K., Walrave M. & Poels K and was accepted for publication in Computers in Human Behaviour.*

**Abstract.** Adolescents are regularly exposed to commercial messages on social networking sites. There is scant knowledge of how they interact with marketing communications on these social platforms. This study examines how advertising on Facebook is associated with adolescents' ad skepticism, and how this influences their purchase intentions. Also, the moderating role of privacy concern and a textual debriefing about the nature of the advertising technique are investigated. In total, 363 adolescents aged 16–18 years participated in an experimental study. The results show that, in general, retargeted Facebook ads (compared to non-retargeting) lead to higher purchase intentions. However, when textual debriefing is provided or for adolescents with a high privacy concern, skeptical attitude toward retargeting increases, which in turn decreases purchase intentions. These research findings hold some important implications for actors from different fields of expertise, such as policy makers, practitioners and educators.

## 7. Conclusion

For a cue to be effective, it needs to be interpreted and recognized as a disclosure cue. A cue, certainly when it is an icon, cannot stand alone and needs some supporting explanation to be understood (Haramundanis, 1996). Cues can only be useful and effective when children understand their meaning and purpose; otherwise the cue will represent an unfamiliar sign or text without any sense. A good example is the PP-logo in Belgium, of which the meaning was found to be unclear among its target group (adults), and therefore ineffective in activating their persuasion knowledge (Tessitore & Geuens, 2012). In other words, it is essential to communicate the meaning of an advertising cue and to make clear how it works and for what reason it is implemented. Moreover, an integration of these cues into awareness campaigns and educational programs is needed so that minors recognize and understand their meaning. In the coming year, experimental studies within the AdLit project will be conducted with regard to the modalities of disclosure cues that assist children and adolescents in their advertising literacy.

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