Children and Adolescents' Advertising Literacy in the Face of New Digital Formats

LA ALFABETIZACIÓN PUBLICITARIA DE NIÑOS Y ADOLESCENTES ANTE LOS NUEVOS FORMATOS DIGITALES

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Abstract: The WHO warns about infodemic, the overabundance of online information that particularly affects social media. In this context, distinguishing content, identifying and selecting reliable sources, and avoiding the spread of misinformation become crucial skills, especially for minors, who are more vulnerable. Recent studies on digital media advertising show that minors often fail to distinguish between entertainment content and commercial content. This raises concerns about their preparedness to deal with these messages and highlights the importance of advertising literacy, as merely knowing what advertising is does not guarantee adequate understanding, especially when faced with content where the persuasive intent is more subtle. Thus, critical thinking becomes essential in literacy programs, presenting a challenge for families and educators. Promoting this mindset is a long-term cultural investment aimed at shaping conscious, committed, and active citizens.

Keywords: Advertising Literacy; New Formats; Digital Advertising; Minors.

Resumen: La OMS advierte sobre la *infodemia*, el exceso de información *online* que afecta especialmente en redes sociales. En este entorno, diferenciar contenidos, saber identificar y seleccionar fuentes fiables y evitar la difusión de desinformación se convierte en una habilidad crucial, sobre todo entre los menores, quienes son más vulnerables. Recientes estudios sobre publicidad en medios digitales muestran que los menores a menudo no distinguen lo que es contenido de entretenimiento y contenido comercial. Esto plantea dudas sobre su preparación para enfrentarse a estos mensajes y resalta la importancia de la alfabetización publicitaria, ya que conocer qué es publicidad no garantiza una comprensión adecuada, especialmente ante contenidos donde la intencionalidad persuasiva es más sutil. Así, el pensamiento crítico resulta esencial en los programas de alfabetización, lo que supone un desafío para familias y educadores. Fomentar este pensamiento es una inversión cultural a largo plazo para formar ciudadanos conscientes, comprometidos y activos.

Palabras clave: alfabetización publicitaria; nuevos formatos; publicidad digital; menores.

1. Introduction

Advertising literacy among minors is an issue of increasing relevance in both academic research and social discussions, especially within the evolving digital context. This special issue reflects on how children and adolescents interact with new advertising formats that seamlessly combine elements of entertainment and persuasion, posing a considerable challenge to identifying them as advertisements.

Over the last decade, interest in advertising literacy has grown significantly, with studies highlighting the difficulties minors face in recognizing advertisements on digital platforms, such as social media, video games, and mobile applications (Smith *et al.*, 2023). Exposure to commercial content is now a routine part of children's digital experiences, and both digital literacy and strategies to protect young audiences have received increasing attention from researchers, educators, and policymakers (Vissenberg *et al.*, 2022).

Nevertheless, the study of advertising literacy among minors is a relatively recent development, with a marked increase in publications since 2020 (Fernández-Gómez *et al.*, 2023). However, research on how children process and engage with advertising in digital environments remains in its early stages. Historically, much of this research focused on television, where advertisements were typically presented in dedicated blocks, with food-related promotions being a primary area of concern (Moreno-Delgado *et al.*, 2020).

This special issue underscores the urgent need to evaluate the capacity of minors to identify, interpret, and critically engage with advertising, particularly in the digital realm. The focus is on understanding and adapting to new advertising formats that blur the boundaries between persuasion and entertainment (Čábyová & Hudáková, 2022). These formats —spanning video games, social media, audiovisual content, apps, and advergaming— have become omnipresent in children's digital experiences. Their rapid proliferation as advertising tools poses a significant challenge, exacerbated by the lack of specific regulatory guidelines to address these emerging dynamics. This issue seeks to shed light on the constantly evolving nature of these formats and their broader implications.

It is also important to acknowledge that younger generations are increasingly critical and resistant to persuasive messages encountered on their devices (Roth-Cohen *et al.*, 2022). However, this resistance can be mitigated if minors perceive added value in these advertisements (Martínez, 2019) or feel a sense of control over them —ensuring the ads do not interfere with their personal activities (Feijoo & Sádaba, 2022). Today, young people favor immersive

advertising formats that do not disrupt their digital experiences, suggesting a demand for advertising where the boundaries between marketing, entertainment, and information are increasingly blurred. This underscores the need to foster critical, informed consumers capable of navigating and interpreting these hybrid contents with autonomy and confidence.

2. Current Context of Minors' Exposure to Advertising

Exposure to commercial content has become an intrinsic aspect of minors' digital experiences. As they engage with increasingly sophisticated advertising formats seamlessly embedded in their leisure activities, the development of advertising literacy becomes crucial. Advertising literacy, defined as the ability to identify and critically analyze persuasive messages, faces mounting challenges due to the evolving complexity of digital marketing strategies. These challenges are particularly evident in three domains: social media, video games, and advertising driven by artificial intelligence (AI).

2.1. Social Media and Influencer Marketing

Social media platforms, immensely popular among minors, often present advertising in forms that are challenging to recognize, especially within influencer marketing. On platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, promotional content often masquerades as personal posts from influencers, obscuring its commercial intent (Freeman & Shapiro, 2014).

Research by Feijoo *et al.* (2021) reveals that minors aged 10 to 14 frequently struggle to identify advertising on platforms like YouTube and Instagram, particularly when promotional content lacks explicit labeling. Conversely, more conventional formats, such as ads in stories, are more easily recognized. This disparity underscores the urgent need for targeted advertising literacy education to equip minors with the skills necessary to both identify and critically assess influencers' promotional messages.

Influencer marketing leverages the perceived authenticity and broad reach of key figures within niche communities. These influencers significantly shape their audience's preferences and behaviors (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Despite its effectiveness, this marketing approach raises ethical concerns due to inconsistent labeling and insufficient transparency, potentially misleading minors regarding content authenticity (Feijoo & Fernández-Gómez, 2021). Educational programs must address these complexities by fostering critical thinking and exposing the commercial motivations behind influencers' recommendations.

2.2. Video Games and the Phenomenon of Advergaming

Video games represent another domain where minors encounter seamlessly integrated advertising. Known as advergaming, this strategy employs interactive and emotionally engaging formats to forge positive associations with brands, thereby enhancing the likelihood of message acceptance (Del Moral *et al.*, 2016; Verdoodt, 2019). Compared to traditional television ads, advergames are more effective at capturing the attention of young audiences (Cho & Riddle, 2020).

The subtlety of advergaming raises significant concerns about minors' ability to recognize it as advertising. An *et al.* (2014) reported that nearly 75% of children aged 8 to 9 fail to identify advergames as promotional content without adequate advertising literacy education. Further research by De Jans *et al.* (2019) emphasizes the importance of advertising literacy programs in helping adolescents aged 10 to 16 critically reflect on advertising practices.

As virtual environments such as the metaverse grow increasingly immersive, minors may struggle to discern commercial content from non-commercial elements (Bonales-Daimiel *et al.*, 2022). This gap between theoretical knowledge and practical skills in identifying persuasive messages highlights the necessity of innovative educational approaches.

To address these challenges, Del Moral *et al.* (2016) advocate for educational objectives that foster critical analysis of advertising's role in consumption, teach an understanding of branding strategies, promote selective consumption habits, and help differentiate between fictional and real elements in hybrid spaces. These initiatives aim not only to improve advertising recognition but also to encourage thoughtful reflection on the broader influence of advertising on consumer behavior.

2.3. Innovations in Advertising Driven by Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) has revolutionized advertising by enabling the creation of personalized messages tailored to individual preferences. While improving efficiency, AI-generated advertising raises ethical concerns, particularly regarding its impact on vulnerable audiences such as minors. AI's capacity to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction poses significant challenges for advertising literacy (Roth-Cohen *et al.*, 2022).

One prominent example of these challenges is the rise of Fake Out-Of-Home Advertising (FOOH), where computer-generated imagery creates fictional outdoor campaigns. These campaigns often lack clear labeling, making it difficult for audiences to recognize their promotional intent (Núñez-Cansado *et al.*, 2021). While some brands use hashtags like #ad or #surrealism to signal

fictional content, these indicators are inconsistently applied, further complicating advertising recognition.

Deepfake technology introduces additional ethical concerns, particularly when used in awareness campaigns. For instance, AI simulations depicting minors' potential future appearances are often employed to alert parents to the risks of overexposure on social media. Although these campaigns are well-intentioned, they underscore the need for stricter regulations to safeguard minors' privacy and rights.

In this rapidly evolving digital landscape, minors must develop robust advertising literacy skills to critically evaluate the promotional messages they encounter across social media, video games, and AI-driven platforms. These educational efforts are essential for fostering critical consumers capable of navigating a landscape where persuasive content increasingly intertwines with entertainment and where transparency remains a persistent challenge (Hudders *et al.*, 2017).

3. Definition and Dimensions of Advertising Literacy

Advertising literacy, as defined by Boush *et al.* (1994), refers to the set of skills and competencies that enable individuals to effectively engage with and critically analyze advertising. Rozendaal *et al.* (2011) expand this definition by categorizing advertising literacy into two distinct dimensions: conceptual and attitudinal. The conceptual dimension includes the ability to recognize advertisements, understand their commercial intent, identify persuasive techniques, and acknowledge the biases they may introduce. The attitudinal dimension, meanwhile, involves developing critical perspectives and fostering skepticism toward advertising.

Recent research emphasizes that a purely conceptual understanding of advertising's persuasive intent is insufficient, particularly in the context of digital advertising formats. Children, for instance, require more than recognition skills to navigate increasingly complex advertising messages (Rozendaal *et al.*, 2011; Rozendaal *et al.*, 2013; An *et al.*, 2014; Vanwesenbeeck *et al.*, 2017; Van Reijmersdal, 2017). Consequently, advertising literacy encompasses two key components: a comprehensive understanding of advertising and its techniques, as well as the ability to discern persuasive intent (Daems *et al.*, 2017). Some authors expand this concept by adding an ethical dimension, focusing on making judgments about the fairness and appropriateness of advertising messages (Rozendaal *et al.*, 2011; Hudders *et al.*, 2017; Rozendaal & Buijzen, 2023).

The role of age as a critical factor in advertising literacy is well-docu-mented, underscoring the need to adapt educational programs to different stages of cognitive and emotional development (Feijoo *et al.*, 2021). To fur-ther refine these programs, researchers distinguish between dispositional knowledge —encompassing cognitive, moral, and emotional competen-cies—and situational processing, which involves applying this knowledge when exposed to specific advertisements (Hudders *et al.*, 2017; Čábyová & Hudáková, 2022).

Advertising literacy education, particularly within school curricula, aims to enhance children's understanding of advertising's purposes and tactics. Such programs focus on fostering critical thinking and equipping students with cop-ing strategies to mitigate the influence of persuasive messages (Nelson & Kehr, 2016; Hudders *et al.*, 2017). Research shows that even brief interventions can significantly improve children's recognition of sales intent, awareness of per-suasive techniques, and understanding of commercial objectives (Hudders *et al.*, 2016; Rozendaal & Buijzen, 2023).

Parental involvement also plays a pivotal role in fostering advertising lit-eracy. Studies highlight the importance of open communication between par-ents and children about advertising, which complements formal education (Loose *et al.*, 2022; Rozendaal & Buijzen, 2023). However, research cautions that understanding advertising's persuasive nature does not automatically translate into critical engagement. A pressing challenge lies in identifying addi-tional factors that foster critical behavior in children when confronted with var-ious advertising formats (Rozendaal & Buijzen, 2023).

4. The Importance of Advertising Literacy for Minors in the Digital Context

Constant innovations in digital marketing and communication have led to in-creasingly subtle and sophisticated advertising techniques. Unlike traditional methods, these strategies are personalized and immersive, making it more dif-ficult for minors to identify them as advertisements, as they seamlessly inte-grate with the content they consume (Smith *et al.*, 2023).

The use of influencers has become one of the most effective strategies for brands to reach children and youth audiences. By leveraging popular fig-ures on platforms like Instagram (Fernández-Gómez *et al.*, 2021a, 2021b), YouTube (Feijoo & Fernández-Gómez, 2021), and TikTok (Smith *et al.*, 2023), companies align their products with content perceived as relatable and trust-worthy. However, the fusion of commercial messages with entertainment

makes it harder for minors to recognize persuasive intent, limiting their ability to critically process such advertisements (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018). Research indicates that cognitive advertising literacy in minors is consistently lower for integrated and interactive formats compared to traditional advertisements (Hudders *et al.*, 2016).

This issue raises significant ethical concerns about minors' exposure to advertising that they may struggle to recognize or fully understand. Additionally, there is growing concern over the lack of clear labeling in many advertisements, leaving minors unaware of their commercial nature (Núñez-Cansado *et al.*, 2021). The digital environment further exacerbates this challenge by presenting formats that blend advertising and entertainment —a phenomenon known as «advertainment» or advertising-entertainment.

Despite the growing prevalence of these formats, academic research has paid limited attention to innovative advertising methods that merge information and entertainment, such as banners, advergames, and interactive social media ads (De Jans *et al.*, 2017; De Pauw *et al.*, 2018; De Jans *et al.*, 2019; De Jans *et al.*, 2020). Addressing these research gaps is critical for developing effective advertising literacy programs. Such programs should equip minors with the skills needed to identify and critically evaluate persuasive messages in an increasingly complex and constantly evolving digital landscape.

5. Current Challenges: New Formats and Ethics in Digital Advertising

Digital advertising has embraced innovations that significantly transform traditional forms of persuasion. Emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), the metaverse, augmented reality, and hyper-personalized campaigns are reshaping how brands engage with consumers, particularly minors. While these innovations open new possibilities for connecting with audiences, they also pose significant ethical, educational, and regulatory challenges.

AI's transformative role in digital advertising hinges on its ability to collect and analyze large volumes of data. This capability enables precise behavior prediction, personalized messaging, and highly targeted campaigns. However, using personal data for such strategies raises profound ethical dilemmas, especially when minors are involved. For instance, the Spanish Data Protection Agency (AEPD) has warned against the risks associated with mass data processing involving minors, underscoring the necessity of safeguarding privacy and implementing clear limits on advertising practices (AEPD, 2024).

The metaverse has emerged as a pivotal platform for immersive advertising, where brands use virtual and augmented reality technologies to create deeply engaging consumer experiences. These interactions forge strong emotional connections between users and brands. Yet, minors often struggle to discern the commercial intent underlying these experiences, which impedes their ability to develop critical attitudes toward advertising messages (Herath *et al.*, 2024).

Hyper-personalization in digital advertising, driven by machine learning algorithms, allows advertisers to tailor messages based on user characteristics and preferences. While enhancing persuasive impact, this approach raises ethical concerns about manipulation and transparency, particularly for minors who lack the tools to critically interpret such content (Feijoo *et al.*, 2024).

Generative AI technologies, including deepfakes, are further revolutionizing campaign creation by designing highly engaging, context-specific messages. However, these technologies can mislead audiences and blur the lines between authentic and fabricated content, creating confusion and raising questions about trust (Bonales-Daimiel *et al.*, 2022).

The increasing sophistication of these advertising formats highlights the urgent need for regulatory frameworks that ensure transparency and uphold the rights of minors. Concurrently, advertising literacy education must adapt to include critical analysis of emerging formats, equipping future generations with the skills needed to navigate this complex digital landscape effectively.

6. Exploring Advertising Literacy: Insights from this Monograph

The articles in this monograph present diverse perspectives, research studies, and educational strategies that examine the impact of digital advertising formats on children and adolescents. These contributions underscore advertising literacy as a pivotal tool for fostering critical and ethical engagement with media in the digital age. By combining practical and theoretical approaches, this monograph explores solutions to challenges posed by advertising formats like influencer marketing and branded content, encouraging deeper and more conscious reflection.

The article «Advertising and Adolescence. Ethnographic Study of a Virtual Community» investigates how adolescents respond to advertising campaigns. Using a virtual community created for the study, it examines adolescents' motivations, attitudes, and relationships with advertising messages. The study provides insights into their acceptance or rejection of various formats and aims to

equip educators with tools for teaching advertising communication. It highlights the necessity for advertising to evolve creatively to connect with young audiences in an ever-changing media landscape.

«Advertising Literacy in the Classroom: The Influence of Familiarity and Habitat» explores how educational interventions improve advertising literacy among adolescents, considering their familiarity with influencers and their rural or urban contexts. The study observes changes in recognizing commercial content and understanding advertising tactics, emphasizing the role of prior exposure to advertising in facilitating literacy. It also highlights the importance of adapting interventions to diverse student backgrounds and knowledge gaps, as well as the effectiveness of varied advertising examples.

In «Advertising and Children: The Viewpoint of Mothers» the focus shifts to mothers' roles in shaping advertising literacy among preschool-aged children. This study examines mothers' perceptions of advertising strategies targeting children, particularly branded content, and how they mediate their children's understanding of such messages. Mothers express critical views of advertising, citing saturation and lack of regulation, while acknowledging the potential of branded content to promote educational values. The study calls for more ethical and educational advertising approaches.

The article «Ontological Design as a Framework for Youth Advertising Literacy» introduces a novel framework for understanding advertising literacy in the digital age. It argues that minors should not only analyze advertising but also reflect on how their digital interactions shape their worldviews. By employing an ontological perspective, the study advocates for empowering youth to co-create media ecosystems and critically engage with technological platforms. However, it acknowledges ethical and pedagogical challenges in fostering autonomy while providing guided experiential learning.

Finally, «Swipe or Subscribe: Do Young People Really Prefer an Ad-Free Instagram?» explores how Generation Z interacts with personalized advertising and their privacy concerns. The study finds that while many young people feel overwhelmed by social media ads, few are willing to pay for an ad-free experience. Instead, they employ avoidance strategies and often prioritize convenience over privacy. This paradox highlights the need for advertising literacy programs to address the implications of such choices, fostering more informed and critical media consumption.

7. Conclusions

The rapidly evolving nature of social media and the continuous innovation in creative advertising formats underscore the pressing need to advance advertising literacy among minors. While most existing research focuses on preteens and adolescents, it is increasingly critical to address how younger children are exposed to commercial content.

Studies such as Loose *et al.* (2022) show that children under seven can already identify certain forms of advertising, especially on traditional platforms like television or YouTube. However, recognizing advertising becomes far more challenging when children engage with influencer-generated content, where entertainment and persuasion are seamlessly intertwined, often obscuring commercial intent.

To address these challenges, academia and society must prioritize research into emerging advertising formats and design advertising literacy programs tailored to the media children frequently consume today. Parents play an essential role in fostering critical thinking by helping children question and interpret commercial messages early on (Rozendaal & Buijzen, 2023). At the same time, policymakers should urgently review and enhance regulations to ensure minors are adequately protected, particularly in cases of integrated advertising that rely on subtle tags such as «advertisement» or «paid collaboration» which young audiences often fail to understand (Feijoo & Fernández-Gómez, 2021; Rozendaal & Buijzen, 2023).

Ultimately, empowering children and adolescents to critically engage with digital content is key. As minors transition from passive consumers to active creators of content, it becomes vital to cultivate their awareness, responsibility, and active citizenship. This foundation will foster a more informed, critical, and engaged society in the future.

Ethics and Transparency

Conflict of Interest
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Author Contributions

Contribution	Author 1	Author 2	Author 3	Author 4
Conceptualization	X	X	X	
Data curation				
Formal Analysis				
Funding acquisition				
Investigation				
Methodology				
Project administration	X			
Resources				
Software				
Supervision	X	X	X	
Validation				
Visualization	X	X	X	
Writing – original draft	X	X	X	
Writing – review & editing	X			

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