



# CONCEPTUAL ADVERTISING LITERACY LEVEL OF CHILDREN IN INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

Market for children consumption is growing worldwide and hence the marketing effort. Marketers are keen to know the behavioural secrets to influence children's consumptions. The promotional efforts are need to be more fruitful and focused, therefore imperative to understand the conceptual advertising literacy level of the targeted child consumers. In order to reveal the related facts, the study examines the conceptual advertising literacy level of children in India. In a computer assisted survey of 392 children between the age brackets of 8-12 years, the researchers examine their ability of advertising recognition, understanding of advertising selling intent and understanding of advertising persuasive intent regarding brand promotion efforts. Results confirm that advertising recognition and understanding selling intent is high in children but children do not acquire a clear understanding of advertising persuasive intent until the age of 9-10 years. Furthermore, children's understanding of advertising's selling intent emerges before their comprehension of its persuasive intent.

**KEYWORDS:** Children, Advertising Literacy, Persuasive Intent, Selling Intent

## INTRODUCTION

Marketers worldwide are now targeting children as their products' target market. Children constitute a major audience for advertisers because, today, they have their own purchasing power and affect the buying decision of their parents (Ward et al., 1972; Atkin, 1978; Dr. T. N. Murty et al. 2013). Also, they're the adult consumers of the future. Marketers know that as soon as the children are caught into their nests, the more easily they can be developed in to potential loyal customer and brand loyalty at a young age thus helps in the unrelenting sales later (Šramová B. 2015). This is an economically cheaper way to create an early childhood customer base rather than to make strategies and plans for adults and senior customers. On the other hand in society, the rising influence of advertisers and changing trends for children in the TV entertainment has become a point of worry for

parents, academicians, policymakers, etc. (Kunkel et al., 2004; E. Rozendaal., 2011).

Marketers and advertisers are continuously trying understanding children psychology and consumption behaviour. The focal point is to know the age when children become capable to understand consciously and objectively regarding various advertisements. In response to this public discussion, academic study on children and advertising has typically focused on children advertising literacy's development (John, 1999; livingstone & Helsper, 2006; E. Rozendaal, 2011). Such competencies are often supposed to determine the susceptibility of children to advertising impacts (Oates & Blades, 2005; young, 1990). According to Rozendaal et. al (2011) children advertising literacy included three dimensions: (A) Conceptual Advertising Literacy - children having conceptual knowledge of advertising; (B) Attitudinal Advertising Literacy- to see



advertising in a critical way; (C) Advertising Literacy Performance -use of conceptual and attitudinal advertising literacy. Further, it has been proposed that conceptual advertising literacy may be effective in lessening children's susceptibility to advertising when they are prompted to use this literacy (Brucks et al., 1988; Roedder, 1981; E Rozendaal et Al., 2011). Therefore, it is relevant to measure the conceptual advertising literacy level of children. Most of the studies on conceptual advertising literacy were focused on the three determinants; (1) Advertising Recognition - Ability to make a fair difference between advertising and media content; (2) Understanding Selling Intent- ability to understand what advertiser is trying to sell out; (3) Understanding Persuasive Intent- ability to understand advertisers persuasive attempts to influence consumer by changing their state of mind, attitude and cognition about the brand.

There are much contested views on, at what age children can make a reasonable distinction in between an Advertisement and the T.V Programs; also, at what age they can understand the advertising. The foundation studies had revealed that this ability evolves around the age of 4 (Gains and Esserman, 1981), but, by the age of eight, nearly all children are able to distinguish between advertisements and TV Program (e.g. Bijmolt, Claassen, & Brus, 1998; Stutts et al., 1981; E.Rozendaal et al., 2011). On the question of children's understanding about the advertisements, advertising selling and persuasive intent, some studies suggests that children may not understand advertising until they reach the age of seven or eight years (Chan, 2000), while other researchers states that their skill of comprehension does not develop until the child is 12 years (Edling, 1999). According to Livingstone and Helsper (2006, p 562), although children as young as 7 or 8 (Piaget's Concrete Operational Stage) understand that advertising is different from information, yet, it is not until they are about 12 years old (Piaget's Formal Operational Stage) that they can articulate a critical thought about the comprehension of advertising and advertiser's intent.

Most of the studies pointed in the direction that children advertising literacy fully develop between the age of eight and twelve (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001). However, majority of prior studies in the field of children advertising literacy is done by making comparison between adult and children, fewer, spoke about children as individually. Therefore, the present study aims to fill this identified gap and provide first-hand information and authentic grounds for understanding of children advertising literacy. The study is to investigate and compare advertising recognition and comprehension of advertising intent by children of 8 to 12 Years age. The children are also compared of their opinion on

the urbanisation level of their location and to see any relationship with advertising literacy level. The study includes the opinion of rural area children realising the facts that social and economic development in India has led to rapid increase in consumer incomes and reach to various media of promotion. Therefore, an effect on children purchasing and decision making is assumed to make a difference and likewise on their advertising literacy levels. Hence, the advertising literacy is also investigated in this regard to make further conclusions.

## **THEORISING THE CONCEPTUAL ADVERTISING LITERACY**

In a need of analysing research gaps and conceptual clarity, a thorough review of the existing literature was conducted and it is realised that literature doesn't support any consensus on the conceptual definition of the children advertising literacy. In spite of the fact that various theoretical models give insight into the advertising-related knowledge and abilities that children must possess (Friestad & Wright, 1994; John, 1999; Moses & Baldwin, 2005; Roberts, 1983; E. Rozendaal et al., 2011), they all basically emphasized on distinct prospective determinants of the children advertising literacy. However, it is generally assumed that advertising understanding develops from very simple to more complex and abstract competences. Furthermore, most models agree that the capacity to differentiate between advertising and programming, as well as the capacity to understand the intent of advertising, are the two most fundamental and first-developed advertising literacy skills. That is the reason why empirical research has mainly focused on these critical components (Ad recognition, understanding selling intent and understanding persuasive intent) of advertising literacy. Yet, research into the theory of children advertising literacy is primarily based on the developmental psychology paradigm like: Theory of cognitive development (Jean Piaget, 1929), Theory of information processing (Roedder, 1981) and Theory of mind (Moses & Baldwin, 2005).

**Advertising Recognition-** Advertising recognition is commonly characterized as the ability to make a reasonable distinction between advertisement content and the other regular TV programming (Wackman, & Wartella, 1977; young, 1990; E. Rozendal et al., 2011). Some studies suggested that by the age of five, three quarter of children can recognise advertising based on perceptual features (Butter, Popovich, Stackhouse, & Garner, 1981; Levin, Petros, & Petrella, 1982) and up to 8 years of their age they master in this competency (Bijmolt et al. 1998). Various studies have investigated children ability of advertising recognition (Bijmolt et al.,



1998; Levin et al., 1982; Palmer & McDowell, 1979; Stephens & Stutts, 1982; Stutts et al., 1981; E. Rzendaal et al., 2011). And the common technique to measure the advertising recognition is Videotaped Method. The present study also used the videotaped method (Butter et al., 1981; Gains & Esserman, 1981). A video clip featuring three advertisements and three other programs was shown to the children. For all the three advertisement children were shown a video and asked whether *is this a TV advertisement?* And on every program were asked *is this not a TV advertisement?* The empirical evidences from the previous studies were reasonably consistent. They all suggested that the majority of 8-year-olds can appropriately differentiate between advertising and programming. To verify the information further, following research question needs to be answered with the help of first hand information:

*RQ1: What is the Ad recognition ability level of children in India residing National Capital Region?*

**Understanding Selling Intent-** Advertising selling intent is usually a direct effort by the advertiser to influence the actions of the consumers. Literature has inconsistent results regarding the age at which children understand the intent of advertising. But few studies proved that children as young as 8 years old begin to gain an awareness of selling intent (John 1999, Martine 1997, Kunkal et. al 2004). However, there are fewer details about the fully developed understanding regards advertising selling intent of children. Despite this, some studies proved that by the age of 12 a child fully developed the understanding about advertisers selling intent (Gunter et al., 2005; Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001). Reason for the same is that, children of this age are able to think about problems in a similar way like an adult and they also at this age learn from their experiences. Present study defines Understanding of selling intent as ability to recognise that an advertisement wants the audience to purchase a product. In the light of this we investigate the following questions;

*RQ2: What is the understanding of advertising selling intent among the children in India residing in National Capital Region?*

**Understanding Persuasive Intent-** Persuasive intent is an indirect attempt of advertisers to influence the mental state of consumers, for example; their interest and beliefs about the marketed product (Moses & Baldwin, 2005). The fundamental aspect of advertising literacy is to have an awareness of persuasive intent. Previous research has shown that children from the age of three can understand advertising is open to doubt (Donohue et al. 1980). But Caroline Oates (2001) found that, after the age of seven or eight years, children began to grasp the persuasive intent of advertiser. This is in line with

Moses and Baldwin's (2005) assumption that it is easier for children to understand that advertisers try to change their behaviour (i.e., selling intent) than to understand that they try to change their mental states (i.e., persuasive intent). The present study investigated both type advertising understating and compare urban and rural children level of understating. To support the discussion, the study investigates the following question:

*RQ3: What is the understanding of advertising persuasive intent among children in India residing in National Capital Region?*

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Participants and Procedure

Demographic profile of the respondents: A total 392 children in the group of 8 to 12 years old participated in the study. Children were selected from schools located in urban and rural schools situated in national capital region of India. The children interviewed in school as the surroundings of school instil a comfort in responding children and intervention of parents can be avoided (Banister and both, 2005). Also, it is assumed that a child from rural school location resides in the rural area. The sample consists 212 (54%) boys and 180 (46%) girls. Children were grouped into five age categories: 8 years (20.2%), 9 years (20.2%), 10 years (19.3%), 11 years (19.8%) and 12 years (17.3%). A bilingual (Hindi as well as English) schedule was used for the data collection. Prior to the survey's execution, institutional permission and informed permission from the children were acquired. Children were conveyed first that the questions are very simple and about television and advertising. To make them comfortable they were told that they could stop participating at any time they wished. Questionnaire was developed in such a way that advertising recognition can be measured by videotaped method and understanding regards selling and persuasive intent is measured by multiple choice questions.

### Measures

**Recognition of Advertising:** To measure the ability to recognize advertising children were presented with three television advertisement featuring children and famous animated character (a chocolate ad, a network ad and a soap ad). Children responded on a given five point scale from *Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree*. To prevent the issue of reaction-bias, children were shown some unrelated video clips. Children were exposed to 3 short clips aired TV programs: a cartoon clip, a news anchoring and a famous kid's dance show. Children were asked *Is this not a TV advertisement?* And they need to respond on a given scale from *Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree*. All the featured videos (Ad and non-



Ad) were of almost same duration of 20 to 30 seconds and were shown randomly.

**Understanding Selling Intent:** Some studies measuring advertising selling intent simply by asking them why commercials are shown on television (Butter et al., 1981; Donohue et al., 1978; Robertson & Rossiter, 1974). While, a number of studies have used a less cognitively demanding technique, for instance by using multiple-choice questions (Bijmolt et al., 1998; Donohue, Henke, & Donohue, 1980; Macklin, 1985, 1987). Present study investigates the understanding of selling intent with three inclusive statements were asked like: *Are advertisements on television there to make you buy the advertised product?* and *Are Advertisements valuable source of information about the selling product?* etc. on a scale ranging from (1) *Strongly Disagree* to (4) *strongly agree*

**Understanding Persuasive Intent:** In order to test the degree of awareness of the persuasive intent

**Table 1: Age wise Advertising Recognition Ability of Children in India**

|                                 | 8 years | 9 years | 10 years | 11 years | 12 years |
|---------------------------------|---------|---------|----------|----------|----------|
| Advertising Recognition Ability | 76.3%   | 86.7%   | 91%      | 95%      | 98%      |

Our second aim was to examine the understanding of advertisers selling intent. A cumulative score of 3.6955 with high standard deviation of 0.72378 was

of marketers, children were asked to score questions about *positive feelings, make a desire to have the product, benefits of product that the advertiser conveyed to them via advertising*. Also, the opinion about the statement that ‘advertisements were on television to attract them’ was inquired.

### SURVEY RESULTS

The first aim of this study was to investigate the advertising recognition level of children. A cumulative mean score of advertising recognition is 3.77 with SD=.70. Results are almost at the degree of ‘Strongly Agree’ level indicated that, children are capable of making a difference between an ad and other programs broadcasted on television. To make the results more meaningful, we have presented the mean scores as percentage of correct responses in table 1.

found. To make the results more meaningful, we have presented the mean scores as percentage of correct responses in table 2.

**Table 2: Age wise Understanding of Advertising Selling Intent in Children in India**

|   | 8 years | 9 years | 10 years | 11 years | 12 years |
|---|---------|---------|----------|----------|----------|
| Understanding of Advertising Selling Intent | 81.7%   | 87.8%   | 88.5%    | 91.2%    | 94%      |

Third aim of the present study was to examine the understanding of advertiser’s persuasive intent. Further to analyse the results, statistical tools were applied and the mean value is the appropriate tool to measure the objective. The average score of 3.6071

and the standard deviation of .76535 for this aspect of advertising literacy suggested a confirmation of advertising literate children. The percentages of correct responses in the different age groups are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Understanding of Advertising Persuasive Intent in Children in India**

|                                 | 8 years | 9 years | 10 years | 11 years | 12 years |
|---------------------------------|---------|---------|----------|----------|----------|
| Understanding persuasive intent | 69.5%   | 73%     | 80.8%    | 86.2%    | 88%      |

### DISCUSSION OF SURVEY RESULTS

The first objective of the study was to investigate the advertising recognition level and children understanding of advertiser selling and persuasive intent. While achieving the objectives, the present research measures took into account the language and memory retrieval capacities of 8 to 12 years old children. It is widely assumed that this

ability generally develops around the age of 8 years. A cumulative mean score of 3.7700 which is almost at the degree of ‘Strongly Agree’ level indicates that, children are capable of making a difference between an advertisement and other programs broadcasted on television. While, measuring the ad recognition level of each age group it is found that the eight years old are still far behind than the 10, 11 or 12 years old





respondents in advertisement recognition. The ability to recognise increases as the child grows to 8 to 9, 9 to 10 and further. This result is in line with the E. Rozendaal et. Al., (2011) that the majority of the 8- to 9-year-old children could recognize advertising.

The second objective of the study was to investigate the understanding of selling intent by children. The results demonstrate that children know that advertisers try to influence them by advertisements and that is why they ask their parents to purchase an advertised product. Respondents acknowledge that advertisements are the important source of information about the selling product and by this advertiser was attempting to alter their liking pattern. They simply understand that this influx of information makes influence to purchase the things they really not needed. Mean score result represented that, respondent's understanding regards selling intent is High. Furthermore, while examining the understanding selling intent of each age group it was found that majority of eight years old children (81.7%) can understand the selling intent of advertiser and this understanding grows with the age.

Further, regarding the third objective, findings indicate that it is easier for a child to understand selling intent than to understand the persuasive intent. Even at the age of 12, a child cannot easily understand persuasive intent. One reason for that, children of 12 years may still lack some cognitive abilities and, as a consequence, their cognitive advertising competences have not yet fully developed (E.Rozendaal et. Al., 2011). As Moses and Baldwin (2005) suggested, children in this age group may be conceptually competent (in this case, able to recognize and understand advertising) and yet fail to apply these concepts in practice. In addition, children may have a lower level of cognitive advertising competences than adults because they are less experienced consumers (Friestad & Wright, 1994). However, results of this study are not in line with the previous researches. As high means score of 3.6071, indicated that children's poses higher understanding regards the advertiser's persuasive intent. Furthermore, while examining the understanding persuasive intent of each age group it was found that 69.5% of eight years old children can understand the persuasive intent of advertiser and this understanding grows with the age. While, we compare this finding with understanding of selling intent component of advertising literacy (3.6955), a distinction has been made and can be said that it is easier for a child to understand selling intent than to understand the persuasive intent. This result is consistent with past research (Moses and Baldwin, 2005, Oates 2001), who theorized that understanding the persuasive intent required higher developmental level that grows with the age.

To sum up, it can be concluded that overall conceptual advertising literacy level of the respondents of the study is sufficiently high. Although children advertising literacy is growing at the age of 8 years and the ability improves with the age, comparatively. Children of 12 years age are quite literate to understand selling intent of advertisement and may start understand persuasive intent in later age.

## LIMITATIONS

This research provided significant insights into the developmental evolution of children's identification and comprehension of advertising by measuring their cognitive advertising skills. Yet, there are a number of limitations with regard to the study. The study focused on the children self-reported measure about their advertising literacy, and this may have overestimated their ability, skill and advertising related knowledge. Future research should include their parents, teachers, peers and can use adults to measure the level of their cognitive advertising skills.

This study only focuses on the conceptual advertising literacy of children because this competency is acknowledged fundamental cognitive advertising competency. However, Rozendaal et. al (2011), adding two more dimensions in their study, as named of, attitudinal advertising literacy and advertising literacy performance as cognitive advertising competencies. More studies are required to determine if the trends found for advertisement recognition and comprehension also apply to other advertising competencies.

The method used in this study is a modified method according to the need of the study. Despite our efforts to improve current research measures, our findings may still be influenced by the measurement employed. Future study should be conducted in order to get an accurate picture of the development of children's cognitive advertising competencies by making use of a combination of various research techniques (Owen, Auty, Lewis, & Berridge, 2007; E. Rozendaal, 2011).

## FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Present study concentrated on television advertising since television watching is still the most popular leisure activity among children (Roberts & Foehr, 2008) and television advertising accounts for the majority of child-directed advertising expenditures (Calvert, 2008). However, marketers are quickly embracing new advertising techniques (e.g., branded websites, advergames, online marketing, social site marketing etc.) that are fundamentally different from conventional advertising and offer numerous new difficulties for young people's advertising processing. Children are likely to struggle



more with identifying and comprehending these new advertising tactics. Further this study can be extended to measure the adolescents and adults advertising literacy level and can be compared with the children advertising literacy level.

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