

# **A Qualitative Approach to Unravel Young Children's Advertising Literacy for YouTube Advertising: In-Depth Interviews with Children and their Parents**

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**Purpose** - This study examines young children's (age 4 to 7) knowledge and skills (i.e., their advertising literacy) for TV commercials, YouTube pre-roll ads, and influencer marketing. Furthermore, the study explores how parental perceptions and practices and children's social abilities influence the development of their advertising literacy.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with parents ( $N = 35$ ) and their child(ren) (age 4 to 7,  $N = 40$ ).

**Findings** - Results revealed preschool children have advertising literacy skills for TV commercials and YouTube pre-roll ads, but not for influencer marketing. These skills are limited to advertising recognition based on perceptual cues and a simple understanding of selling intent. Children's advertising skills evolved according to age but did not relate to social development. Furthermore, advertising literacy was related to parental media mediation: the more restrictive parents were regarding media use, the less advertising literacy their children appeared to have. No moral reflections regarding advertising were found among the preschool children.

**Originality** – This study fills significant gaps in the literature on young children and advertising. It conducts a qualitative investigation into young children's knowledge of digital advertising formats (pre-roll ads and influencer marketing) and how they differ from traditional advertising (TV commercials). Furthermore, it takes both parental influences and social developmental variables into account.

Watching unboxing videos, in which popular online personalities unpack and review products, has become a popular leisure activity among young children (aged three to seven) (Elias and Sulkin, 2017). This is not surprising since these videos often feature underage children, also known as kidfluencers, who function as role models for their viewers (De Veirman, Hudders & Nelson, 2019). For example, Ryan's World, where the 10-year-old boy Ryan Kaji unpacks and reviews toys, is currently the fifth most subscribed children's YouTube channel (Ceci, 2021). Advertisers often collaborate with those popular video creators to create sponsored videos, a marketing tactic known as influencer marketing (De Veirman *et al.*, 2019). Next to those integrated formats, YouTube viewers are heavily exposed to skippable and non-skippable commercials that interrupt their videos (i.e., pre-or midroll videos) (Cramer-Flood, 2021).

Children under the age of seven are considered vulnerable to the impact of advertising. Previous research on TV commercials has shown a link between exposure to advertising and materialism (Watkins *et al.*, 2016) and obesogenic eating behavior in young children (Emond *et al.*, 2016). This may be because these children have not yet gained the necessary knowledge and skills to deal with persuasive attempts. This knowledge, defined as advertising literacy, entails the ability to on the one hand recognize and understand the persuasive intent of advertising (i.e., cognitive component) and on the other to form an affective and so, critical evaluation of different advertising formats (i.e., evaluative component) (Rozendaal *et al.*, 2011, Hudders *et al.*, 2017). Since young children's cognitive, emotional and moral abilities are still underdeveloped; it has long been assumed they do not possess any advertising literacy (John, 1999; Moses and Baldwin, 2005).

Recently, however, research has shown that children under seven do possess some limited advertising literacy skills. Specifically, young children were found able to

recognize and to some extent understand TV commercials and digital advertising formats like YouTube pre-roll ads and advergames (Mallinckrodt and Mizerski, 2007; Vanwesenbeeck *et al.*, 2020; Sramova and Pavelka, 2017). No research is yet available on integrated formats such as unboxing videos. In these videos, advertisements are woven into the media content, making it difficult for young children to discern one from the other (Hudders *et al.*, 2017).

Theoretically, the current study aims to provide new insights into young children's advertising literacy by considering children's Theory of Mind (ToM) skills. This refers to the ability to think about others' thoughts and feelings and is linked to a better understanding of advertising's manipulative intent (Moses and Baldwin, 2005). Next to developmental influences, it will be examined how parents' perceptions and practices toward media and advertising will play a role in the development of their child's advertising literacy (see for example Watkins *et al.*, 2017). In addition, studies focusing on the impact of (digital) advertising on children under the age of seven are scarce and no research is yet available on how young children respond to influencer marketing. Therefore, this study aims to examine how the level of integration may hamper young children's advertising literacy, by comparing their advertising literacy for TV commercials and YouTube pre-rolls with that for influencer marketing [here, a YouTube unboxing video]. To do so, in-depth interviews with children and their parents were conducted.

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Advertising Literacy Development**

Young children (age three to seven) are at the beginning of their consumer

development, known as the consumer socialization process. This allows minors to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to function within their role as a consumer (Ward, 1974). Consumer socialization is influenced by children's cognitive and social development, thus becoming more refined with age (John, 1999; John and Chaplin, 2022). As young children's consumer skills are underdeveloped compared to those of adolescents and adults (Ekström, 2006), these will impact their advertising processing. The young people's processing of commercial media content (PCMC) model of Buijzen *et al.* (2010), for example, argues as children grow older their advertising processing becomes more systematic and elaborate. As such, children below the age of seven are believed to process advertising automatically, without thorough cognitive elaboration. Therefore, young children are more likely to be influenced by persuasive messages implicitly through affect-based transfer mechanisms. For example, positive emotions evoked by jingles of TV advertisements might transfer to the featured product (Buijzen *et al.*, 2010). More thorough processing is enabled by higher levels of advertising literacy. Still, having the necessary knowledge does not entail usage of it during advertising exposure. This distinction between having advertising knowledge and using it when exposed to a commercial refers to dispositional advertising literacy in the former and situational advertising literacy in the latter (Hudders *et al.*, 2017).

Children aged three to seven years old fall within John's (1999) perceptual stage of consumer socialization, indicating their consumer knowledge is bound to perceptual and concrete features of the marketplace (e.g., brand names) (John, 1999). Specifically, for the cognitive component of advertising literacy, these children can discriminate between commercial and general media content based on perceptual features like the ad's duration or brand characters (Sramova and Pavelka, 2017, Nelson *et al.*, 2017). In addition, studies have shown they can understand advertising's selling intent (Nelson *et*

*al.*, 2017, Sramova and Pavelka, 2017). However, these results were established for TV commercials, where the distinction between commercials and media content is clearer. YouTube pre-rolls, which are skippable or non-skippable commercials shown prior to a YouTube video (Handayani and Hudrasyah, 2015), are similar to TV commercials as they are also clearly separated from the media content, making it easy to discriminate the persuasive content from the medium (Vanwesenbeeck *et al.*, 2020). More integrated advertising could therefore be more challenging in terms of recognizing advertising and understanding its selling intent.

Influencer marketing is one such format, as the persuasive message is integrated into the influencer's content, blurring the distinction between commercial and media content (De Jans *et al.*, 2018). According to the PCMC-model, this increased level of integration may impair young children's processing of advertising (Buijzen *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, influencer marketing lacks the general characteristics of traditional advertising children rely on to recognize advertising (e.g., voice-over or short duration). Research comparing formats with varying levels of integration and their relation with advertising literacy in young children is however lacking, especially for digital advertising. To expand on previous findings, we propose the following research questions:

*RQ1: Are young children (age 3-7) able to recognize (i.e., differentiate advertising from media content) and understand (i.e., understanding advertising's selling intent) TV commercials, YouTube pre-roll ads, and YouTube influencer marketing?*

*RQ2: On which advertising features do young children base their advertising recognition and understanding?*

Next to recognizing and understanding advertising, advertising literacy also comprises an evaluative component. This entails both the formation of an attitude to the

advertising message (Rozendaal *et al.*, 2011) and a critical reflection regarding the morality of advertising in terms of fairness and appropriateness of the employed advertising tactic (Hudders *et al.*, 2017).

Young children are believed to depend on other people to perceive and regulate their emotions (Bariola *et al.*, 2011). They can, however, understand emotions aroused in a certain situation. Still, in line with the perceptual stage in John's framework (1999), they focus on the most salient aspects of an emotional situation, neglecting other information that might contribute to a correct understanding of an emotional situation (Berk, 2018). For instance, research found young children mainly evaluate advertising as entertaining as they focus on the most central features (e.g., brand characters) and neglect other (peripheral) factors of an ad like its selling intent (Rozendaal *et al.*, 2011, McAlister and Bargh, 2016). As children grow older and become aware of the intent of advertising, they are believed to become more skeptical, resulting in more negative or indifferent attitudes towards advertisements (Chan and McNeal, 2004, Rozendaal *et al.*, 2011).

Even though young children can make moral judgments, theoretical frameworks (e.g., Kohlberg, 1975) assume it is limited to a self-centric and concrete (e.g., rule violation followed by punishment) evaluation of a situation (e.g., hitting a friend violates social norms and results in punishment by an authority figure). Therefore, these children may not be able to make critical judgments about more abstract situations in which there is no violation of social rules followed by punishment (e.g., advertising tactic in a commercial) (De Pauw *et al.*, 2018). Vanwesenbeeck *et al.* (2020) have shown that young children indeed lack critical attitudes toward advertising, both for TV commercials and YouTube pre-roll ads. However, it is still unclear what underlies children's evaluation of advertising and whether their evaluation differs for YouTube influencer marketing:

*RQ3: How do young children evaluate TV commercials, YouTube pre-roll ads, and YouTube influencer marketing in terms of morality?*

### **Social Development**

Although consumer socialization theory places all children under the age of seven in the perceptual stage (John, 1999), others distinguish between the advertising literacy of preschoolers (three-to-five-year olds) and elementary school children (six-to-seven-year olds) (e.g., Arredondo *et al.*, 2009, Sramova and Pavelka, 2017). In this context, the presence of ToM skills is considered a key tipping point. ToM refers to taking the perspective of others and understanding one's thoughts and feelings that may differ from those of others (Moses and Baldwin, 2005). ToM is believed to be an important prerequisite for understanding and evaluating advertising (Lapierre, 2015). Research has shown ToM skills develop with age, with a turning point around age four (Wellman *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, after children acquire ToM skills, they should theoretically be able to critically process advertisements. However, empirical findings on this topic are ambiguous: while some studies find a relation between advertising literacy and the presence of ToM (see McAlister and Cornwell, 2009), others do not (see Vanwesenbeeck *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, we formulate the following RQ:

*RQ4: Do advertising literacy skills differ between preschool-aged children (3 to 5 years) and primary school children (6 to 7 years) for TV commercials, YouTube pre-roll ads, and YouTube influencer marketing?*

*RQ5: Are young children's ToM skills related to their advertising literacy skills?*

### **Parental Mediation**

In addition to young children's social skills, the development of advertising literacy is also influenced by external social influences, as children learn by observing



prominent social figures like their parents or peers (Bandura, 1977; Mishra and Maity, 2021). How parents contribute to the development of their children's advertising literacy might be related to their own level of advertising literacy. Studies focusing on parents' advertising processing have shown that parental advertising literacy is related to the extent to which parents mediate their children's media use (Nelson *et al.*, 2017). Parental mediation involves the use of strategies by which parents teach their children the necessary skills to manage media exposure and thus prevent the negative effects of media use (Hudders and Cauberghe, 2018). Researchers distinguish two main types of mediation. First, active mediation is characterized by actively commenting on and discussing media content. Second, restrictive mediation entails actively limiting media use, for example, by introducing rules (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2005, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2018).

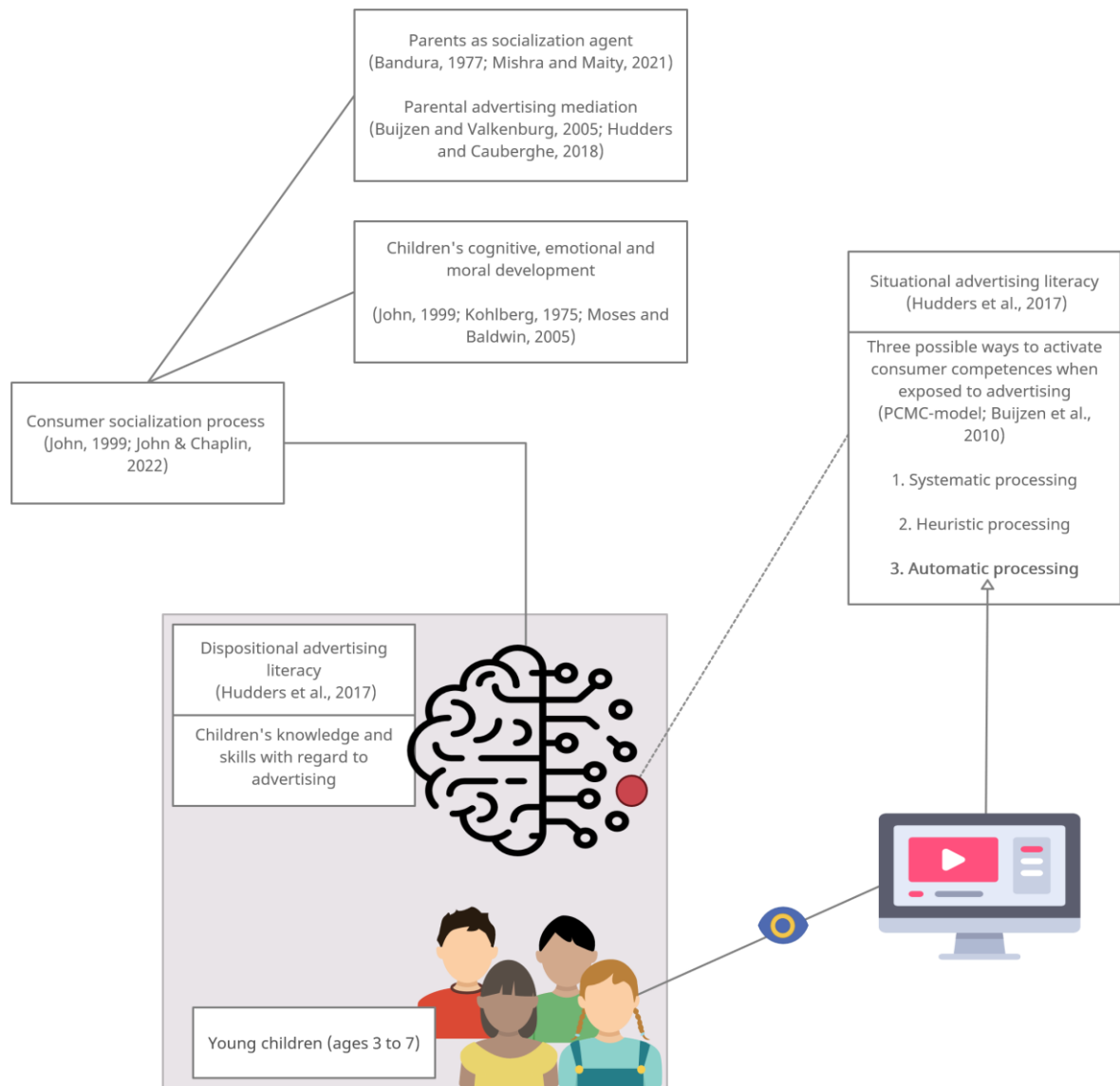
Research on the effectiveness of parental mediation shows that active mediation is more effective in reducing undesirable consequences (e.g., aggression) of children's media use (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2005). The same appears to be true for mediation of advertising (i.e., how parents interact with and regulate their children's advertising). Research with older children has shown that active advertising mediation, as opposed to restrictive advertising mediation, leads to increased cognitive and affective advertising literacy (Rozendaal *et al.*, 2016), decreased susceptibility to advertising, and moderation of undesirable advertising effects (e.g., materialism) (Buijzen, 2009, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2018). However, research on parental influences on young children's advertising literacy in the context of digital advertising formats and how they might differ from traditional formats are lacking:

*RQ6: How is children's advertising literacy for traditional and digital advertising formats related to parental mediation style?*

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of young children's advertising literacy processing. As a result, it summarizes the aforementioned theoretical frameworks.

**Figure 1**

*Visual representation of young children's advertising literacy and processing*



**Method**

Due to the interpretative approach of this research, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to ensure an active audience perspective. The total sample consisted out of 35 parents (30 to 46 years,  $M_{age} = 38.06$ ,  $SD = 4.21$ ) and 40 children

(four to seven years,  $M_{age} = 5.28$ ;  $SD = 1.06$ ). Twenty-four children were aged four and five years old and 16 were aged six to seven years old. The children sample included 19 boys and 21 girls. The parent sample included ten fathers and 25 mothers.

Participants were recruited and interviewed at the children's book department in the public library of Ghent (i.e., de Krook) during a school holiday (February 2020). If a parent was present with multiple children aged four to seven, all children ( $N = 6$ ) were interviewed. This also held if two parents were present ( $N = 1$ ). Before conducting this study, approval was obtained from the ethical review board of the researchers' university faculty.

Two researchers conducted the interviews. To minimize the interview length, children were interviewed in a separate room, at the same time as their parents. Before the start of the interviews, parents were informed about the purpose and confidentiality of their own and their child's interviews. Following this, the parents signed an informed consent for their interview and provided active parental consent for the children's interview. Children were also informed about the course of the interview and were assured they could end the interview at any time. Interviews were taped and transcribed. All interviews (parents and children) took on average 20 minutes.

## **Procedure**

### ***Interviews with children***

The first author of this study conducted the interviews with the children. A semi-structured interview guide (supplementary file Appendix I) with additional visual support (supplementary file Appendix II) was used. Visuals aid young children in formulating an answer without relying on the interviewer (Fane *et al.*, 2016, Zarouali *et al.*, 2019). To ensure the clarity of the questions among the young target audience, this guide was

pretested with four children (three to six-year-olds; two boys and two girls). The necessary changes were made after the pretest. Furthermore, our pretest revealed three-year-olds struggled with the interview questions. Therefore, we decided to not include three-year-olds in our final sample.

The interviews started with questions about their personal lives to put the children at ease. This progressed into general questions about their media use and advertising knowledge. If the children indicated they did not know what advertising was, they were given the following description to ensure the continuation of the interview: *“In an ad, new products like toys or cars are shown to show you that it is available for you or your parents to buy”*.

Next, the children watched five videos: an excerpt of a popular children’s TV program (i.e., Paw Patrol or Mega Mindy), a TV commercial showing a toy (i.e., PlayMobil), a pre-roll advertisement showing a toy (i.e., Play-Doh) before a short YouTube video, and a sponsored YouTube unboxing video, where a toy was unboxed (i.e., robot dog) by a kidfluencer. After each video, children’s ad recognition, understanding of selling intent, and attitude were explored (based on Rozendaal et al., 2016’s measurement instrument for children’s advertising literacy). For the YouTube pre-roll ad, we added questions addressing their exposure to YouTube ads and coping with this format. For the main questions (ad recognition, selling intent, and attitude) visual support was provided.

After exposure to all videos and questions, we explored children’s general attitudes towards and moral insights into advertising. To make the concept of morality clear to the participants, we first practiced and explained the concepts of good and bad, after which they were asked whether they thought ads were good, bad, or both. Again, in this section of the interview, children were motivated to rely on images to answer.

Lastly, ToM skills were measured by two false beliefs tasks (Baron-Cohen *et al.*, 1985) (supplementary file Appendix I). Scores on each false belief task ranged from zero to two. The final score for ToM was the mean of the individual scores. Interviews were terminated by giving the children a brief and simple explanation of the research goals.

### ***Interviews with parents***

The parents were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide (supplementary file Appendix III). The interview tackled three main areas: family media use, YouTube advertising, and attitude toward advertising. First, parents were asked to describe their own and their child's media use. They were also asked to elaborate on the mediation style they typically use. The second phase focused on YouTube advertising. Specifically, the participants were asked about their encounters, attitude, and understanding of general YouTube advertising. This was followed by questions about their child's encounters with advertising on YouTube, their attitude, understanding, and coping with those formats. Lastly, the parents were asked about their specific mediation style and their attitude regarding advertising in general. The interviews ended with a short debriefing of the study.

### ***Data analysis***

Interviews were analyzed using NVivo 12 software for qualitative data analysis. Analysis was handled through a thematic analysis approach, entailing six steps: 1) familiarizing with the data, 2) generating initial codes, 3) searching for themes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, 6) producing the report (Braun and Clarke, 2008). To generate our initial codes we chose a deductive (based on the interview topic guides) and semantic (based on the explicit meanings of the data) approach (Braun and Clarke, 2008). Two coding schemes were created, one for the parent interviews and

one for the child interviews. We analyzed children's responses by age and ToM skills. We then compared children's responses with those of the parents on recurring themes (e.g., attitudes toward were in both children's and parents' interviews).

## **Results**

### **Media Use**

Parents indicated that all children were familiar with using a TV, tablet, and smartphone. The most popular apps among the preschool group were streaming apps Netflix and YouTube. In the primary school group, these were Netflix, YouTube, and TikTok. Children's media use seemed to be related to their parents': the more parents used online media, the more their children used it.

The frequency of YouTube use varied across children. While some children sporadically watched YouTube videos and barely recognized the app, others were avid users that knew how to navigate YouTube. Especially, six-to-seven-year-old respondents appeared more familiar with YouTube compared to the four-to-five-year-old children. Most parents indicated their children used the regular YouTube app and not the YouTube kids app. As YouTube Kids restricts the presence of advertising, children's advertising exposure using the general YouTube app is thus most likely greater. Of all parents in our sample, three knew the YouTube Kids application, of which two had it installed.

As for parental mediation of their children's media use, parents indicated they mostly opt for a restrictive mediation style, with a preference for time-based restrictions over content restrictions. Time-based restrictions varied from the limitation of time (e.g., '30 minutes per day'), to allowing media use on certain occasions (e.g., 'when it rains') to frequency limitations (e.g., 'three times a week'). Content restrictions were often realized by opting for recorded TV programs or separate streaming platforms (e.g.,

Netflix), as this provides child-friendly content. Additionally, most parents also monitored their children's media use by being in the same room or letting them use shared devices. However, they mentioned using the time their child spends on media to do housekeeping or take some time for themselves. Thus, this additional monitoring happens passively as opposed to co-viewing: '[When asked if they supervise their child's media use] They always stay close, so sometimes we glance over but we are not always sitting next to them [Mother, 39, 5-year-old daughter]'.

Active mediation is mostly employed to talk about content restrictions. Most often, the child initiates the conversation by asking why they may not watch a certain program. Spontaneous discussions on the content children watch are rare: '[When asked if they discuss what their child watches] No, not really discussed in the family context, they sometimes tell 'oh I have seen this' but discuss, I would not call it that. They just tell us what they have seen [Father, 46, 6-year-old daughter]'.

Mediation styles related to the specific media used. For instance, as Netflix and YouTube Kids provide specific child-friendly content, parents often monitor children's media use on these platforms to a lesser extent as they view it as safe for their children. Further, our interviews revealed parents do not consciously mediate their child's advertising exposure, as one mother stated: [when asked whether she explains advertising to her child] 'Not really because he's six and advertising you have it in different forms... I am also not concerned with that... There's advertising everywhere [Mother, 44, 6-year-old son]'

### **Young Children's Recognition and Understanding of (YouTube) Advertising**

Below we describe young children's ability to recognize and understand advertising, as well as which advertising features influence their ability Furthermore, we

shed light on how these abilities evolve with age and how ToM skills play a role in this regard. As a result, the following sections address RQ1, RQ2, RQ4 and RQ5.

### ***Advertising recognition***

When discussing the word “advertising”, most children indicated they knew what advertising was. However, some children showed mere recognition of the word but were not able to verbally conceptualize it. Still, even children as young as four years old could describe advertising or name the things they associate with it (e.g., “ability to skip” or “directed to adults”). Some children who were not able to verbalize what advertising is could indicate their attitude towards it, thereby implicitly showing recognition of the concept. This was especially the case for four-to-five-year olds: ‘[Child could not say what advertising is when asked about her attitude towards it] I think it is good because it means I can watch a clip, I think it is bad because I have to wait to watch a clip [5-year-old girl]’.

Children’s recognition of advertising became more accurate when growing older: while preschoolers (four-to-five-year olds) mostly mentioned their associations with advertising: ‘Yes, those are videos for parents. [5-year-old girl]’, primary school children (six-to-seven-year olds) could give a clearer description: ‘Yes, that is, like, advertising about shampoo. They say things about that shampoo and where you can buy it in the store [7-year-old boy]’.

The ability to conceptualize advertising did not necessarily relate to their ability to recognize the specific advertising messages. Some children who were not familiar with the word ‘advertising’ were successful at recognizing an advertisement and elaborating on this recognition. This was mainly based on them relying on perceptual cues (e.g., the yellow line at the bottom of a YouTube pre-roll ad or the presence of toy boxes): [When asked if he knew what advertising is] ‘No I don’t know what that is.’ [When shown a



YouTube pre-roll ad] '[That is] advertising. Because there are toys and children [5-year-old boy]'

This was further supported by the parents, as they assumed their child was able to distinguish between advertising and general media content based on the visual characteristics of advertisements, but not on clear knowledge about the concept of advertising itself. As one parent stated in the case of a pre-roll advertisement: 'I think he just knows "I see those three - two - one and I know that's a commercial". I think that tells him it is an advertisement. If you ask him what advertising is, I do not know if he could answer. [Mother, age 35, 5-year-old son]'. Following this, most parents stated their child knows how to skip an advertisement in the context of YouTube pre-roll ads: 'They have learned how to skip it, I think they just saw me do it and understand that is a way to watch their video faster [Father, age 35, 4 and 6-year-old son]'

Comparing children's advertising recognition of the different formats, both recognition of TV commercials and pre-roll ads were quite accurate. Four-to-five-year old children were more dependent on general advertisement features (e.g., duration, voice-overs, or the presence of toy boxes), while six-to-seven-year old's advertising recognition depended on visuals that explicitly referred to advertising (e.g., skip button and yellow line in the case of YouTube advertising) and information provided in the advertisement (e.g., novelty, price, and product availability).

Most of the participants struggled to recognize YouTube influencer marketing (i.e., unboxing video) as an advertisement, confirming this advertising format possesses challenges for children's advertising literacy. This appears to be due to the absence of general advertising features (e.g., no voice-over) or the personal nature of an unboxing video. As such, the participants did not have (perceptual) cues that helped them to recognize the specific advertising attempt. Additionally, familiarity with vloggers also

appeared to impede recognition: ‘It is a normal video because I sometimes watch such videos [6-year-old girl]’. Some children indicated the unboxing video could be both a normal video and a commercial as the kid in the video showed a toy but the video did not contain typical ad features such as a voice-over or a yellow line on YouTube. This was both the case for the older preschoolers (five-year-olds) and the primary school children (six-to-seven-year old’s), but not for the younger preschool children (four-year old’s).

### ***Understanding advertising’s commercial intentions***

Most participants showed difficulty freely answering when asked about the intent of a TV program or commercial. When they were presented with supporting visuals (i.e., a picture indicating the video is intended to persuade you to buy something or have a good time) most did answer correctly. However, it appeared most children did not fully grasp the goal of the presented ads. This became apparent when asked to elaborate on their initial answer. Most correct answers did not seem to signify a full understanding of selling intent but were rather correct by association. For example, one five-year-old girl correctly identified the selling intent of the unboxing video. Further elaboration, however, showed she picked the right answer because the answer option contained the word ‘buy’ and she reasoned as the boy in the video must have bought the toy, it must be the right answer. This thinking pattern was especially present in the preschool-aged children, for example: ‘[The unboxing video] is meant to make you have fun because the guy in the video is playing [and that is fun] [4-year-old boy]’. Incorrect answers were often made because children associate toys with having fun. The ads used during the interviews all included toys so this could have led to incorrect answers. As a participant indicated: ‘[When asked about the goal of a pre-roll ad] It is meant to bring joy because there is something to play with and that is fun. Advertising with a nasal spray is made to make you buy something because it is something new [6-year-old boy]’.

Children's understanding did not differ between a TV- and a pre-roll YouTube commercial. Some six-to-seven-year old's also misidentified the goal of the regular TV program excerpts; however, this did not seem to be due to a lack of understanding but by making further associations related to the video content. For example, some children stated it is also possible to buy toys from Paw Patrol in-store, therefore the video could cause you to buy those things.

Similar to the recognition of advertising, older children were more sophisticated in their advertising understanding: six-to-seven-year-old children were able to elaborate on their answer: 'It is meant to make you buy something because at the end they said you can buy it [6-year-old girl]', four-to-five-year olds seemed to struggle with this matter as most of them were unable to provide reasoning behind their answer: 'It is meant to make you buy something [when asked why they think so] I do not know why [5-year-old girl]'.

Lastly, although the prevalence of ToM skills in our sample was in line with what the literature suggests (i.e., the older the children were, the better they scored on the false-beliefs tasks), our participants who seemed to lack proficient ToM skills (i.e., scoring zero or one on the tasks) did not appear to be worse at understanding the selling intent of the advertisements in comparison to children of the same age who did possess ToM-skills.

To summarize, young children (ages 3-7) could recognize and understand TV commercials and YouTube pre-roll ads, but not YouTube influencer marketing (RQ1). Their recognition and comprehension *were* based on perceptual features of an ad, such as a voice-over, short duration, or the presence of a skip button on YouTube (RQ2). Advertising literacy was discovered to improve with age, as primary school children demonstrated better recognition and comprehension of TV commercials and pre-roll ads than preschoolers (RQ4). This difference, however, could not be attributed to the development of social skills (RQ5).

## **Young Children's Attitudinal and Moral Evaluation of (YouTube) Advertising**

This section will examine young children's attitudes toward advertising, both attitudinal and moral, and how they relate to their ToM abilities. As so, RQ3 and RQ5 are addressed.

When children were asked to state their attitude regarding advertising in general, almost none of the children held a clear positive stance toward advertising in contrast to what was posited in older research (e.g., John, 1999). The majority classified advertising as negative or both positive and negative. Children who said to dislike advertising attributed it mostly to the need to wait before they can watch their preferred program, indicating they experience advertising as irritating. The product promoted in videos seems to determine whether a child (dis)likes the video: if the product is appealing to them they like the ad, while if the ads are not appealing they tend to dislike the ads: 'When I see an advertisement for Pokémon cards, then I like it. If I see things for adults or girls I do not like it [6-year-old boy].' Parents did state this (dis)liking of the ad is what determines whether their child wants to skip an ad: if the ad appears boring to the child they are more inclined to skip the ad.

While assessing their attitude after watching the different ad formats, children had no outspoken positive or negative attitudes towards the ad formats. Attitudes depended more on the product presented in the video (as indicated above). Although it did not appear most of the children liked one ad format more than the others, most parents stated their child's attitude does depend on the advertising format. Parents believed their children would be more positive or neutral toward TV commercials in contrast to YouTube pre-roll ads, as one mother stated: [About YouTube pre-roll ads] 'Yes, but I think they experience that as annoying because they want to watch something, so they have to wait. They find TV commercials pleasant to watch [Mother, 39, 5-year-old son]'.

Attitudes did seem to change across the different age ranges. Six-to-seven-year-olds often indicated to find advertising both fun and boring while four-to-five-year participants mostly seemed to dislike advertising. Additionally, the six-to-seven-year-old children could elaborate on their given attitudes in comparison to the four-to-five-year-olds. Especially younger preschoolers (four-year old's) were often not able to provide clear reasoning.

Although the children were able to morally judge an everyday situation (e.g., a friend stealing your toys), meaning they all possessed basic moral judgments, this did not expand to the commercials. In this case, most children showed a lack of moral judgment. This became apparent when asked to elaborate on their answer, which they motivated by stating their attitude: 'It is a little bit good and a little bit bad. It is a bit good because I know a video is coming and it is a bit bad because I have to wait [5-year-old girl]'. A few six-to-seven-year-old children showed basic moral judgment of advertising, as one child said: 'It is a little bit good and a little bit bad. It is good because I would later like to do that myself, so I would earn some money. But it is also bad because if you want to watch a movie, you do not want to watch commercials [7-year-old boy]'. Overall, both four-to-five-year and six-to-seven-year old participants showed little moral insights in response to advertising although they were able to morally evaluate a given situation.

Overall, we discovered no moral evaluations of advertising for either preschool or primary school children (*RQ3*). Evaluation of advertising, like advertising recognition and understanding, was unrelated to the child's ToM skills in terms of both affective and moral evaluation (*RQ5*).

### **Parental Mediation**

This final section will discuss how parental mediation relates to children's

advertising literacy skills as outlined by RQ6.

Interviews with the parents showed most were not concerned about their children's advertising exposure. As a result, many of the interviewed parents did not restrict their child's advertising exposure because they found it useless as advertising is omnipresent. Furthermore, parents did not seem to actively mediate advertising exposure. Some parents indicated they have discussed advertising and its purpose to their children. However, this did not seem to occur systematically, as it only happened when they come across a certain advertisement. Also, when it occurred, their parental mediation occurred through a one-way discussion in which the parents mention but do not actively discuss it in a conversation with their child(ren). Some parents acknowledged they could play an important role in helping their children learn to deal with advertising exposure. However, despite acknowledging this, these parents did not engage in active discussions with their children about advertising and its purpose.

The lack of advertising exposure mediation could be due to attitudes they hold in this regard. Most parents did not hold strong opinions about advertising. Multiple parents noted the interview made them more aware of the presence of advertising and the possible impact on their children, showing advertising is not a top-of-mind subject for them. This could be related to their habituation to advertising: 'I'm kind of blind to advertising [Mother, age 43, 7-year-old daughter]'. They did indicate to find it annoying while, for example, watching a YouTube video, but they rather see it as a necessary evil as they understand companies need to obtain revenues. Parents mentioned they have gotten used to the amount of advertising on the Internet and TV, and it does not bother them anymore: 'It's annoying but part of the deal. I am also not willing to pay for it so that's my payment, right? [Mother, age 30, 4-year-old daughter, 5-year-old son]'.

Their attitude did seem to relate to the opportunity to skip advertising: if there is the possibility to skip the ad, they find it less annoying than when there is no opportunity to skip it. A minority of the parents held a strong negative stance regarding advertising. This was often related to the possible influence it has on their children due to their children's inability to recognize ads: 'Children are dependent on adults for being in touch with reality and society. They cannot distinguish so well between the messages they are seeing [Father, age 41, 5-year-old daughter]'. A negative attitude might also be caused because the parents themselves dislike the promotion of materialism or the idea they might be persuaded to buy the promoted product.

Linking parent and child interviews revealed that the specific mediation style parents implement related, in most cases, to their children's advertising recognition and understanding. Children whose parents implemented both time and content restrictions appeared to be worse at recognizing and understanding advertising. This is not surprising as content restrictions were often realized by using ad-free platforms like Netflix and on-demand television; thereby, unconsciously limiting the children's exposure to advertising. This also held for exposure to YouTube advertising: children who did not use YouTube frequently or whose parents installed an adblocker appeared to be worse at recognizing YouTube advertising. Further, actively monitoring YouTube exposure seemed to result in less accurate recognition of YouTube pre-rolls. This may be due to, as some parents indicated, them skipping the advertising to prepare the videos for their children to watch. The opposite seemed to hold as well. Children whose media use was not limited appeared to be better at differentiating advertising from media content and understanding its intention.

The possible link between media use, mediation styles, and advertising literacy was however not straightforward. Some of the children whose parents limited advertising

exposure were very good at making the distinction between ads and media, understanding its intention, and reasoning on their choices. This could be because the amount of media exposure is different under certain circumstances. For instance, multiple parents stated that, although they limit YouTube exposure, they are aware the grandparents are looser and do not mediate this.

Overall, young children's advertising literacy was related to the parental mediation style employed. More specifically, the stricter the parents' control over media exposure, the poorer the children's ability to recognize and understand advertising, and vice versa. However, this relationship was affected by contextual factors (RQ6).



## Discussion

First, our results revealed young children can recognize and to some extent understand the selling intent of both TV commercials and YouTube pre-roll ads, contributing to existing findings (Sramova and Pavelka, 2017, Nelson *et al.*, 2017, Vanwesenbeeck *et al.*, 2020). However, they struggled in recognizing and understanding YouTube influencer marketing. This could be because their recognition and understanding of advertising are based on perceptual features, such as a voice-over or the presence of a skip button on YouTube, which are not present in influencer marketing. Additionally, we saw a distinction between having knowledge about advertising and using it when exposed to an ad. Especially the preschoolers in our study did not seem to have proper knowledge about advertising. Nevertheless, most of them were able to recognize TV commercials and YouTube pre-rolls as such. In contrast, while the preschoolers seemed to be more opposed to advertising in general, this did not translate into outright negative attitudes after being exposed to a particular ad. These results reflect the distinction between dispositional and situational advertising literacy, as posited in prominent theoretical frameworks (Hudders *et al.*, 2017). These two forms of advertising literacy are thought to be linked by our coping skills (Hudders *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, the lack of a link between the situational and dispositional advertising skills of preschoolers in our sample could be due to the absence of necessary coping skills. We recommend future researchers explore this matter further and so reveal what preschoolers are exactly lacking to properly deal with persuasion attempts.

Children's recognition and understanding of advertisements showed age-dependent development, as these skills were better developed in primary school children than in preschool children, complementing previous studies (e.g., Arredondo *et al.*, 2009, Sramova and Pavelka, 2017). Although the prevalence of ToM ability we measured is

consistent with the literature (the older children are, the better they can consider others' perspectives and intentions), our study did not find an association between the presence of ToM and children's level of advertising literacy. While this is consistent with some previous studies (e.g., Vanwesenbeeck, 2020), it also challenges the findings of other studies that have found a relation between the two (see McAlister and Cornwell, 2009). The fact no relation between ToM and advertising literacy was found in both this study and that of Vanwesenbeeck *et al.* (2020) may be due to the ToM measurement used. Both studies measured ToM through false belief tasks. However, McAlister and Cornwell (2009) used additional tasks (i.e., appearance reality and pretend representation) to measure ToM skills, which may explain these inconsistent results. Future studies should therefore use more comprehensive measures of ToM to further investigate these findings.

Second, our findings extend previous research by showing preschool and primary school children lack moral judgment regarding advertising, which to our knowledge had not been previously studied in advertising research with young children. Although participants were able to answer whether they perceived advertising as good, bad, or both, closer examination revealed their answers referred to their attitudes toward advertising, not to a critical moral evaluation. This lack of moral judgment is not surprising, as prominent frameworks (e.g., Kohlberg, 1975) assume children up to ten years of age are only capable of making a moral judgment based on a transgression or following of basic rules, followed by punishment in the former and reward in the latter. In the case of advertising, there is no violation of basic rules and morals; therefore, judging the appropriateness and fairness of advertising tactics may be too abstract for preschool and primary school-aged children. Following frameworks (Friestad & Wright, 1994) that consider the presence of moral judgment important in the processing of advertising, it

could be argued that young children lack an important skill that could enable them to make fair and informed evaluations of advertising and advertised products.

Finally, by combining child and parent interviews, we found a relation between young children's advertising literacy and parental mediation style. The more strictly parents control media exposure, the less able children are to recognize and understand advertising, and vice versa. Thus, we confirm previously established findings (e.g., Buijzen, 2009). However, because our study was based on qualitative interview data, it could still be that parents' responses are socially desirable therefore over-or underestimating parental control, leading to skewed results. Future studies could address this caveat by, for example, conducting diary studies that track media exposure and parental mediation on a day-by-day basis. These have already proven fruitful in studying young children's exposure to and processing of advertising (e.g., Kinsky and Bichard, 2011). Further, our interviews revealed the relation between parental mediation styles and children's advertising literacy is ambiguous. For example, some of the children whose parents actively limit advertising exposure are very good at distinguishing between advertisements and media, understanding their intent, and justifying their choices. In our case, these divergent results could be due to contextual variables outside the home, like media exposure under grandparents' supervision. We, therefore, recommend future studies consider children's media use, advertising exposure, and mediation outside the home.

### **Implications**

Our results have important scientific and societal implications. From a scientific perspective, our study challenges theoretical frameworks that assume young children cannot process advertising (John, 1999), as it shows future theoretical work on children's

advertising literacy should not neglect this age group. Because influencer marketing targeting young children is not limited to unboxing toys on YouTube, future studies should also examine other types of content. For instance, the impact of exposure to sponsored videos on other platforms (e.g., TikTok) or by older creators on young children's advertising literacy should be investigated. More importantly, because young children have been shown to lack the skills to process influencer marketing, it should be investigated whether they can be aided in this matter. For example, advertising cues have been shown to help older children recognize advertisements (De Jans *et al.*, 2018), but little research exists for young children. In addition, based on our findings, we recommend future researchers examine the effects of young children's broader socialization network (e.g., peers, schools, and grandparents) on their advertising literacy.

From a social perspective, our results show preschool and primary school-aged children are vulnerable to integrated advertising. Advertisers and content creators should be aware of this vulnerability when targeting this age group and consider the appropriateness of child-directed marketing. In addition, policymakers should consider whether current advertising regulations are sufficient to protect this age group. Furthermore, because advertising was shown not to be a top-of-mind topic for parents, more emphasis should be placed on educating parents. Policymakers should consider developing and implementing education programs for parents, who can then play a critical role in empowering their children to engage critically with modern advertising.

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## Appendix I

### *Child interview guide*

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#### **Introduction**

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Intro Today we are going to watch some videos. Afterward, I'm going to ask you some questions and we're also going to play some games. Is that all right by you?

Early termination If at any point you don't like this anymore and want to stop then you can say so and we'll stop right away. Right?

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#### **Topics and questions**

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General media and advertising Do you watch television sometimes? What do you watch then? Sometimes when we watch TV, we also see some advertising. Do you know the word advertising? Do you know what it is?

Okay so next, we are going to watch some videos, and then I am going to ask you some questions after each video

TV program 1

#### **Ad recognition**

TV commercial

Was the movie a commercial or a cartoon?

TV program 2

No answer: review options separately (yes vs. no)

Was it a cartoon?

Was it a commercial?

#### **Selling intent**

Do you think the movie wants you to buy something or have fun?

Why do you think so?

#### **Attitude**

Would you like to show what you thought of the movie via these emojis? Why do you think so?

YouTube pre-roll ad

#### **Ad recognition**

Did you see the short clip that played before the YouTube video?

Was that clip a commercial or a cartoon?



No answer: review options separately (yes vs. no)

Was it a cartoon?

Was it a commercial?

**Selling intent**

Do you think the movie wants you to buy something or have fun?

Why do you think so?

**Attitude**

Would you like to show what you thought of the movie via these emojis? Why do you think so?

**Exposure and coping**

Have you ever seen videos like the Play-Doh commercial on YouTube?

What do you do when you see a clip like that on YouTube?

Do you know where to click to make it go away?

YouTube influencer  
marketing

**Ad recognition**

Did you see the short clip that played before the YouTube video?

Was that clip a commercial or a cartoon?

No answer: review options separately (yes vs. no)

Was it a cartoon?

Was it a commercial?

**Selling intent**

Do you think the movie wants you to buy something or have fun?

Why do you think so?

**Attitude**

Would you like to show what you thought of the movie via these emojis? Why do you think so?

**Exposure**

Have you watched any videos with this child before?

Do you like to watch movies like this where other kids unwrap toys?

General advertising attitude      How do you feel about advertising?  
 Do you like it, hate it,...? (pointing out emojis)  
 Why do you think so?

Morality regarding advertising      Do you know what good and bad mean? I'm going to make it clear through an example:

Suppose your friend knocks another child over, that's bad. And then this thumb belongs to it (red thumb down). If you help a friend clean up, that's good and then this thumb belongs (green thumb up). Sometimes something is a little bit good but also a little bit bad and then we put this thumb there (orange thumb). Do you understand?

*Practice till understanding.*

Think about the commercials we have seen, what thumb would you put next to them? Are they good (pointing), bad, or in between?

Theory of mind      This is Sally. She has a basket. This is Anne, she has a box. Sally  
 False-belief Sally and Anne      has a marble and puts it in the box. Sally goes outside. Anne takes the marble out of the basket and puts it in the box. Now Sally comes back. She wants to play with her marble.  
 Question 1 - Where is Sally looking for her marble? (false-belief)  
 Question 2 - Where was the marble first (memory)?

Theory of mind      This is Felix. He has a piece of chocolate and puts it in a blue box.  
 False-belief red and blue box      This is Jerom. Jerom has a red box. Felix walks out. Jerom puts the chocolate in the red box.  
 Question 1 - Where does Felix look for his chocolate?  
 Question 2 - Where was the chocolate first?

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Ending      Thank you for answering all the questions and playing the games.  
 Of course, in some of the videos you watch, there was a little bit

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of advertising. By asking you all these questions, I know what children like yourself think and feel about advertising.

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## Appendix II

### Visual answering options

#### 1. Affective evaluation



#### 2. Moral evaluation



## Appendix III

### Parental interview guide

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#### Introduction

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Intro	First of all, thank you for participating in this study. By participating, you are contributing to a research project of the Department of Communication Sciences of Ghent University.
Recording	As you can see, we have brought along recording equipment, which will be used to record this interview. The interview is being recorded so that it can be transcribed afterward. After transcription, the recordings are deleted.  Do you agree that this interview is recorded on tape? Your child's interview will also be recorded. In addition, we would also film it. Do you think it is okay for this to be filmed?
Purpose of research	Within this research, we are conducting interviews with parents and their children. Through these interviews, we want to map the media use of both you and your child, and specifically YouTube.
Anonymity and confidentiality	This interview is anonymous, which means that your personal information will not be used or mentioned. In addition, the things you tell us and the information you give us will only be used for this study.
Early termination	If you decide during the interview that you do not want to continue, you may indicate this at any time. We will then stop the interview.

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#### Topics and questions

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##### Media use

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*Before we get started with the interview we would like to mention the following. If we specifically ask about your child during this interview, this applies to the child who is also being interviewed. So please keep this child in your mind while answering these questions.*

- Family media use      We would first like to know how often your family uses media at home throughout the week and on weekends.
  
- Parental media use      Could you please describe what your media use looks like during a normal working week? So this is about your media use.  
 (When and how do you watch TV? Netflix - recorded programs - movies - etc.)  
 Do you often listen to music? Through radio, YouTube, Spotify, etc.?  
 Do you often read the newspaper? Online - paper  
 Do you check social media often? Which ones? How?  
 To what extent is the above media use different during the weekend? What do you do more/less of?
  
- Child media use      Can you describe your child's media use?  
 Does your child have their own devices (own TV in their room, own tablet, smartphone)  
 What does your child's media use look like throughout the week?  
   o How often does your child watch TV?  
   o How often is your child on the tablet/gsm?  
 What does your child do on the tablet/gsm?  
 How different is this during the weekend?
  
- Mediation media      What rules do you have regarding media use?  
 Match what they said earlier and ask additional questions:  
 Can your child choose when to watch and what to watch? Why?  
 Do you sometimes have disagreements about media use with your child? When? Why?  
  
 Do you discuss with your child why they should not watch certain programs or play games?

Do you discuss with your child what they have done/seen? Why?  
Do you try to explain things to your child about what they have seen on TV or in a movie?

Do you sometimes try to avoid letting your child see certain media content? Why?

What do you do while your child is using media? Do you supervise what they do? Do you watch what your child does with them? Why? Do you watch videos or play games together?

- Mediation partner How does your partner view your child's media use? Does his/her view differ from yours? Do you deal with it in the same way?

- Parental YouTube use Do you often watch YouTube? Do you have your own account? What do you watch on YouTube? Do you sometimes post videos yourself? What about your partner?

- Child YouTube use How often does your child watch YouTube?  
What does he or she watch?  
Does it have its own account?  
Does your child sometimes ask you for permission to make videos?  
Do you know the YouTube Kids app?  
Does your child sometimes use it?  
Why do you let your child use this app?  
YouTube Advertising

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## YouTube advertising

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- Exposure When you use YouTube, do you often encounter advertising?

Do you think this is too much/just right? Why?

How do you feel about seeing advertising on YouTube? Why?

How do you feel about the advertising itself? Do you like it, are you bothered by it?

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What do you do when you see advertising? Why? (skip it?)

Why do you think there are so many advertisements on YouTube?

- Thanks to advertising, you can watch YouTube for free. What do you think about that? Do you pay for certain media (e.g., Spotify, Netflix) so you don't have to see advertising?

- Attitude

Do you think this is too much/just right? Why?

How do you feel about seeing advertising on YouTube? Why?

How do you feel about the advertising itself? Do you like it, are you bothered by it?

- Coping

What do you do when you see advertising? Why? (skip it?)

- Insight

Why do you think there are so many advertisements on YouTube?

- Coping

What do you do when you see advertising? Why? (skip it?)

Do you pay for certain media (e.g., Spotify, Netflix) so you don't have to see advertising?

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#### Advertising formats

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- Exposure and Knowledge Forms On YouTube, you can see different forms of advertising. What types of advertisements have you encountered?

- Exposure children *The advertising seen on YouTube is often adapted to the content of the video. For example, you are more likely to see an advertisement for cooking products when you watch a cooking video. This is also true for videos that are often watched by children (e.g. cartoons, children's series). Then advertising relevant to children will be shown (e.g., toys, cookies, or candy).*

Do you think your child sees a lot of advertising?

- Attitude, Knowledge & coping children

How do you think your child responds to this?

Does your child realize that it is advertising?

Does it realize that the advertisers want to sell something through the advertisement?

Can it distinguish it from the video it wanted to watch?



How does your child handle advertising on YouTube? Will it skip the commercial? Does it ask you to skip the commercial?

Does it allow itself to be influenced by advertising?

Has your child ever asked for products from you that it had seen in advertising? On YouTube? On other media? (Games, TV, leaflet, etc.)

- Unboxing videos Does your child follow vloggers on YouTube?

*These vloggers also often make videos showing products they have received for free or make a video specifically to promote a particular brand. For example, some preschoolers post videos where they unwrap toys like Lego or taste certain cookies. This is a newer form of advertising that we often see on YouTube.*

Does your child sometimes watch such videos where toys are unwrapped or cookies are tested?

Has your child ever asked about products promoted by these vloggers? If so, has your child received those products?

- Attitude advertising What do you personally think about advertisers trying to influence your child through these different forms of advertising on YouTube? Why?

Do you think this form of advertising is fair and responsible? Are certain formats more or less ethical? Why?

Do you think there should be clear regulations around these forms of advertising? Why?

- Attitude advertising How does your partner feel about this? Do you think they share your opinion?

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- Mediation YouTube advertising self Do you try to keep your child from YouTube advertising in certain ways? For example, do you use an ad-blocker?  
Do you click away from ads in front of your child?  
Do you explain to your child what advertising is?  
Do you make it clear what the purpose of certain videos or advertisements on YouTube is?  
Do you sometimes point out to your child that vloggers are not always sincere about the products they show/use?
  
  - Mediation YouTube advertising partner Does your partner do these things too?  
How do they handle it?
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### **Closing**

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- Closing the interview Is there anything else you would like to add to this conversation?  
  
Are there any things that were not covered in the conversation but that you feel are important to share?
  
  - Debriefing Thank you for answering all the questions. Through the interviews with you and your child, we are trying to find out a few things. We are looking at what preschoolers know about the different forms of advertising on YouTube and what they think of these advertisements. We are also investigating whether this is related to their media use. Finally, we will also look at the influence of your attitude towards your child's media use on their knowledge.
  
  - Thanking for participation Your participation is a great help in our research. So I would like to thank you for your time and your participation in the interview.
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