



University of Sheffield

PhD Thesis: Exploring Children's Advertising Literacy in the Contemporary Media Environment



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Abstract

Scholars from across the world continue to discuss and debate the psychological, ethical and regulatory issues associated with advertising to children. Despite this, research that explores children's understanding of advertising more holistically (i.e. from more than just a cognitive developmental perspective) is largely absent from this area. Research must consider dimensions of children's advertising literacy, that is, their ability to recognise, process and understand advertising and marketing messages besides their age and cognitive ability.

Thus, this PhD presents an exploration of children's advertising literacy, which draws upon an interdisciplinary framework encompassing conceptual and empirical research from two key disciplines: marketing and sociology. This research uses a combination of creative workshops and semi-structured peer interviews with children aged 9-11 years in the UK.

This thesis intervenes in established debates about the commercialisation of childhood and children's culture. It explores children's advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment, forging a dialogue between research on children's understanding of advertising and consumption behaviour in light of increasingly digital lifestyles.

Findings support the suggestion that children need to recognise commercial intent, be that an advertiser's intention to sell or persuade, in order to identify something as an advertisement. However, in contrast to this assumption, findings also indicate that the ability to identify something as an advertisement is perhaps just one element of a child's overall advertising literacy. It is also important to consider the application of literacy, the process of interpretation and understand that recognition of underlying commercial intent is not the only factor that may influence the way advertising is interpreted, evaluated and understood by children.

In addition to enhancing existing bodies of knowledge, this research highlights six issues for policymakers where the efficacy of current advertising regulations could be improved and proposes a number of recommendations for socially-responsible advertising to children in the UK.

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I would also like to give special thanks to my two academic supervisors: Dr Caroline Oates and Professor Fraser McLeay for all their feedback, support and advice throughout the entirety of my studies. You have both been utterly marvellous and I feel very privileged to have benefited from your expertise, wisdom and kindness.

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- Sheli Smith, December 2024

Dedication

In loving memory of my mum, whose unconditional love and support made me believe I could accomplish anything in life.

(Adrienne Mary Hudson 1955 – 2024)

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List of Publications and Presentations from this PhD Research

Peer-reviewed Journal Articles:

1. Smith, S., Oates, C.J. and McLeay, F. (2023) Slimy tactics: The covert commercialisation of children's content, *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, doi.org/10.1080/0965254X.2023.2218855

Conference Papers:

1. Smith, S. (2021) The Defeat of Habit by Originality: Using Creative Workshops to Engage Children in Research, National Centre for Research Methods E-Festival [online] November, 2021 (*Finalist - video poster competition*)
2. Smith, S. Oates, C.J. and McLeay, F. (2022) Defence Against the Dark Art of Marketing: Exploring Socio-contextual influences on children's marketing literacy in the contemporary media environment, 10th Child and Teen Consumption Conference, Universidad de Complutense, Madrid, May 2022
3. Smith, S. (2022) Defence Against the Dark Art of Marketing: Exploring Socio-contextual influences on children's marketing literacy in the contemporary media environment, 11th White Rose Doctoral Conference | Sheffield, June 2022 (*Winner - Best presentation in Sustainable Management, Growth and Economic Productivity Pathway*)
4. Smith, S. (2022) Defence Against the Dark Art of Marketing: Exploring Socio-contextual influences on children's marketing literacy in the contemporary media environment, Academy of Marketing Doctoral Colloquium, University of Huddersfield | July 2022
5. Smith, S. (2022) Defence Against the Dark Art of Marketing: Exploring Socio-contextual influences on children's marketing literacy in the contemporary media environment, NARTI Doctoral Conference | University of Liverpool, June 2022

Book Chapters:

6. Smith, S. (in press) Responsible Marketing to Children in the Digital Environment: The Challenges and Implications for Policy and Practice, in Hossein, O. (Ed) *Responsible Service Management*, Emerald Publishing, Bingley, UK

Foreword

“Marketing’s ethnography of childhood has validated children’s emotional and fantasy experience... The marketers didn’t have to assume that children’s daydreams, hero worship, absurdist humour and keen sense of group identity were meaningless distractions or artefacts of immaturity. Rather, they recognised that these attributes were the deep roots of children’s culture, which could be employed as effective tools for communicating with them. Identifying the basis of children’s experience provided the means for transforming them into a market segment.” - *Kline, (1993, p19)*.

Image 1.1



(Source : Atud Media, 2022).

Chapter 1.0 Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Children's popular culture has been the root cause of various social and ethical concerns that have been subjected to the scholarly spotlight throughout modern history. Many of these concerns are best understood in terms of "moral panics", defined here as unjustified or "exaggerated adult fears about children's fads" (Schor, 2005, p15), which have become a hallmark of modern social history.

As Cohen (2011, p46) observes;

"Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough but suddenly appears in the limelight."

To put this into context, in the 1950s there were legitimate concerns that comic books were corrupting children by degrading family morals and encouraging juvenile delinquency (Buckingham, 1993). Whereas by the 1980s, concerns over comic books had been replaced by new ones surrounding the links between playing violent video games and increased aggressive behaviours in children (Anderson and Bushman, 2016). These perspectives changed however at the beginning of the 21st century, when new research emerged demonstrating that even the most violent video games could have educational benefits and positive impacts on children's literacy development (Gee, 2007).

It seems that moral panics are inextricably linked to the role of mass media in society, with issues becoming more or less relevant in accordance with changes in the media landscape. Nevertheless, certain issues never really disappear from the 'limelight' (Cohen, 2011). For example, the commercialisation of childhood and the consequences of child-targeted marketing have retained a persistent presence on the socio-political agenda for almost six decades (Nairn, 2008; Nelson, 2018). Hence, that is the focus of this PhD thesis.

1.2 The Origins and Evolution of this Research

As the media landscape has grown and evolved over this period, so too has academic interest in the practice of marketing to children and the effects that exposure to commercially-motivated communications might have on them. As such, scholars from across the world continue to discuss and debate the psychological, ethical and regulatory issues associated with the increasing commercialisation of childhood (Nairn, 2008; Nelson, 2018).

Research on the topic first emerged back in the 1960s, many years before mass media advertising had become common practice. These early studies predominantly focused upon children's cognitive processing of persuasion (Livingstone and Helpser, 2006) and were heavily influenced by the work of the prominent developmental psychologists at the time such as Piaget's (1960) 'Ages and Stages' model of child development (Bartholomew and O'Donohoe, 2003; Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008; Sparrman, Sandin and Sjöberg, 2012).

At the beginning of the 1970s, there were still relatively few researchers interested in studying children and marketing. For those who were, the focus was on understanding

“the development of patterns of thinking and behaving, which comprise consumer behaviour [in childhood] as a way of predicting future consumption patterns in adults.” (Ward, 1974, p1).

However, children suddenly became a captive new audience for marketers following the emergence of television (TV) as an advertising medium, which offered a wealth of opportunities to target them directly (as well as their parents) during peak family viewing times (Rostron, 1996). Thus, there was a rapid increase in research on TV advertising specifically and its potentially harmful influence on the youth market (Robertson and Rossiter, 1974; Levin, Petros and Petrella, 1982; Schor, 2005). At that time, two of the most popular TV advertising tactics were host-selling and programme-length commercials. These commercials featured characters from the same television programmes they were shown alongside and were almost as long as a typical episode, creating an extended entertainment experience for young audiences (Kunkel, 1987).

1.2.1 Case Study: Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles TV Series (Playmates/Mirage Studios, 1988)

One of the most infamous examples of the programme-length commercial is The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles [TMNT] television series, based on the eponymous comic book conceived by two graphic artists; Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird. First aired in 1988, the programme's sole objective was to promote 'Turtles' action figures and toys, because the manufacturer; *Playmates*, did not believe that they would sell well if introduced as a stand-alone product into the children's toy market (Galindo, 2019).

Despite its blatant commercial agenda, the TMNT series was an instant hit with young audiences, thanks to its action-packed storylines and unique blend of humour, adventure, and camaraderie (Rostron, 1996). Indeed, TMNT was so popular that sales of its merchandise exceeded \$1.1 billion in the first four years post-launch, exceeding all expectations and making 'Turtles' toys the third best-selling action figures of the time (Newby, 2020).

Whilst not all executions of host-selling and programme-length commercials achieved the same level of commercial success, TMNT epitomised the programme-length commercial as the "video equivalent of a Toys-R-Us catalogue" (Rostron, 1996, p63). In other words, it proved that entertainment could be an extremely effective way to market toys, games and merchandise to children. The TMNT media franchise became a hallmark of popular culture and created a global community of fans, which continues to grow almost 40 years later (Newby, 2020).

It may not be immediately obvious as to why a case study featuring an obsolete commercial format from the 1980s is relevant to this PhD research on advertising in contemporary media environment, where more than half of all commercial expenditure is now allocated to media that did not even exist 30 years ago (Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2023). However, it helps to illustrate the disconnect that still exists between marketing academics and marketing practitioners on both sides of the debate surrounding children as consumers (a point returned to in Section 1.2.3, p8). This case study also provides an example of academic research's long-standing influence on children's marketing and advertising policy, which continues to this day.

For instance, by 1974, American scholars had repeatedly raised concerns about the ethics of blending commercials and entertainment programmes, resulting in a ruling by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) stating:

"Basic fairness requires that at least a clear separation be maintained between the program content and the commercial message so as to aid the child in developing an ability to distinguish between the two" (FCC, 1974, p39401).

In light of this, both Host-Selling and Programme-Length Commercials were eventually banned in many countries. Not only did this decision emphasise that the ability to distinguish commercials from other forms of communication was an important dimension of advertising understanding (Young, 1990), it also legitimised concerns that child-targeted marketing is inherently “unfair” (Kunkel, 1987, p5), which set the tone for the following five decades of research.

Critics argue that marketing has gradually invaded all aspects of children’s everyday lives (Kline, 1993; Levin and Linn, 2004; Jaakkola, 2019), positioning them as “cogs in a great, spinning commercial wheel” (Mayo and Nairn, 2009, pXV), which has reinforced the concept of the ‘exploited’ child (Martens, Southerton and Scott, 2004; Cook, 2004a; Buckingham, 2004; Schor, 2005; Sparrman et al., 2012; Gunter 2014; Nairn and Spotswood, 2016). Overall, the literature presents a compelling argument that childhood itself has become *too* commercialised (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; Cook, 2004a; Martens et al., 2004; Schor, 2005; Nairn, 2008; Gunter 2014) and that marketing, in *all* its forms, is to blame.

However, despite the numerous references to ‘marketing’ in studies across multiple disciplines (including developmental psychology, consumer socialisation, childhood studies, media and communications science and education research), it is important to point out that significantly more research attention has actually been dedicated to the study of ‘advertising’ in comparison to other marketing communications tactics, such as sales promotions, branding, personal selling and public relations in terms of children and young people (Sigirci et al., 2022). As such, there is a wealth of evidence on the negative effects of advertising exposure on children (Richens, 1987; Kline, 1993; Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2000; Sparrman et al., 2012; Jaakkola, 2019).

To summarise, one of the most widely researched areas relates to food advertising and its effects on children's eating habits and unhealthy food choices (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012; Ferguson et al., 2012; De Jans et al., 2017). Studies have analysed the use of child-targeted designs on High Fat Salt and Sugar (HFSS) food packaging (Harris, Schwartz and Brownell, 2010; Mehta, Philips, Ward and Coveney, 2012), including the use of fantasy appeals (Rose, Merchant and Bakir, 2012), licensed cartoon characters and cross promotions with popular media franchises (Castonguay, Kunkel, Wright and Duff, 2013). This is in response to concerns that the promotion of so-called 'junk' (HFSS) foods is a leading cause of rising childhood obesity levels (Harris et al., 2010; Tarabaskina, Quester and Crouch, 2015).

This has resulted in the UK introducing some of the toughest restrictions on HFSS food advertising in the world (Mehta et al., 2012; Tarabaskina et al., 2015), including the banning of advertising of HFSS products before 9pm on all broadcast and online media (Gov.uk, 2020). Inevitably, this caused a backlash from the advertising industry, who claimed that that an outright ban on HFSS advertising was a "severe and disproportionate measure that goes far beyond the government's objective of protecting children" and would only reduce children's calorie consumption by approximately 1.4% (Cox, 2020, n.p). Nevertheless, it remains a prominent area of children's advertising research (Rossiter, 2019).

Aside from increasing desires for unhealthy foods, advertising is thought to increase children's awareness of a seemingly endless choice of brands, products and services (Oprea, Buijzen, van Reijmersdal and Valkenburg, 2014). Thus, frequent exposure to advertising has been consistently linked to increased interpersonal conflict within the family home (Robertson, 1979; Strasburger, 2001; Gunter et al., 2005), particularly when children's purchase requests are ignored, denied or unfulfilled by their parents and caregivers (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2003). Evidence suggests that this can harm children's self-esteem, especially for those who are growing up in low-income families, where there is often significant disparity between their personal materialistic desires and the realistic purchasing power of their household (Nairn and Oprea, 2021). It is well documented that children exert a significant influence on wider household and family spending (Gunter and Furnham, 1998; Buckingham, 2000; Anitha and Mohan, 2016), where twice as many purchases are triggered by children than parents are aware of (Ebster, Wagner and Neumueller, 2009). As such, advertising has also acquired a reputation for driving sales by exploiting 'pester power' (Ebster et al., 2009), which is defined as "the tendency of children, who are bombarded with

marketers' messages, to unrelentingly request advertised items” from their parents and caregivers (Henry and Borzekowski, 2011).

Elsewhere, advertising has also been criticised for communicating powerful messages that the acquisition of material possessions ultimately leads to happiness and is the best way to demonstrate success, superiority and social status to others (Nairn and Oprea, 2021). Some scholars argue that this results in the development of more materialistic attitudes in children and young people (Oprea et al., 2012) and encourages conspicuous consumption (Schor, 2005). In other words, advertising reinforces the idea that desirable qualities such as beauty, popularity and ‘coolness’ can be achieved through the direct consumption of, or indirect association with certain products and brands (Schor, 2005). Furthermore, evidence suggests that the unrealistic ideals of beauty and unattainable lifestyles portrayed in advertisements (Lemay, Clark and Greenberg, 2010) can negatively affect children’s perception of themselves (Hargreaves and Tiggemann, 2003), resulting in lower levels of emotional wellbeing and self-esteem (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Kasser, 2003).

On balance, there is a much smaller body of evidence pertaining to the positive effects of advertising (Lawlor and Prothero, 2008; Oprea, Buijzen and van Reijmersdal, 2016; Lapierre et al., 2017). Nevertheless, some studies have shown advertising exposure can encourage positive behaviours (Lapierre, 2017) and increase the sense of ownership that children feel over their own environment (Oprea, Buijzen and van Reijmersdal, 2016). However, in a society dominated by concerns about the intensity of child-targeted marketing (Roth-Ebner, 2024), it is somewhat understandable that only a handful of studies have begun to challenge the assumption that advertising exposure is always harmful to children (Lapierre, 2017).

Advertising is positioned as something that children need to learn to defend themselves against and policymakers need to ensure they are protected from (Robertson and Rossiter, 1974; Roberts, 1982; Phillips, 1997; John, 1999; Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2003; Kunkel et al., 2004; Nairn and Dew, 2007; Cook, 2008; Rozendaal, Lapierre, van Reijmersdal and Buijzen, 2011; Sparrman, et al., 2012; Rozendaal, Buijs and van Reijmersdal, 2016; Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2023). Over time, this has culminated in a shared moral concern “about the intensity of marketing towards children and ways to combat it” (Cook, 2004a, p148).

1.2.2 Children's Advertising Literacy Research

Hence, a significant amount of research has focused on understanding children's ability to recognise and process advertising attempts (Robertson and Rossiter, 1974; Roberts, 1982; Young, 1990; John, 1999; Moses and Baldwin, 2005; Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2023), a concept commonly known as "advertising literacy" (Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005, p223) and how to improve it (Rozendaal, Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2011; Nelson, 2018) as a way of addressing these concerns (De Jans, Van de Sompel, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2019).

An extensive review of children's advertising literacy literature is presented in the following Chapter in Section 2.2, but a summary is provided here to provide further context for this PhD study.

Historically, advertising literacy research has primarily focused on the different stages of children's cognitive development and how these can be conceptualised "to determine exactly when children are able to understand that commercial messages are specifically designed to persuade audiences and encourage purchasing behaviours" (Lapierre, 2015, p423).

Previous studies have attempted to clarify the age at which children can realistically "cope" with advertising attempts (Moses and Baldwin, 2005, p187) and process them "in a conscious and critical way" (Rozendaal, Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2011, p329) to establish the age at which it ought to be considered 'fair' to target them commercially. The consensus is that children are unable to defend themselves against "unethical manipulation by advertisers" (Nairn and Dew, 2007, p32), until they possess an 'adult-like' understanding of advertising by the time they are 12 years old (John, 1999). This has reinforced the assumption that children are more at risk of being misled by advertising than adults are (Eagle, 2007) and are "uniquely" susceptible to its persuasive effects simply because of their limited cognitive abilities (Kunkel et al., 2004, p1).

Naturally, these concerns have been a key motivation for undertaking research that can inform socially-responsible policy decisions and make recommendations on the most effective ways to regulate the advertising industry. Central to these concerns are debates surrounding the notion of what is right for children, which;

"fuel debates in policy, academia, the media, and popular culture; debates that...gain much of their momentum from entrenched assumptions about what is good for children, what children need, what is in children's best interests [and] what, after all, a child is" (Woolgar, 2012, p33).

1.2.3 Children as Consumers: The Disconnect Between Marketing Academics and Marketing Practitioners

This is reflected in the academic world, where ongoing debates exist between scholars from different disciplines, who disagree about whether it is children's choice or commercialisation that drives children's consumer culture. In other words, if consumer culture is shaped by internal factors (e.g. individual consumption preferences) or external factors (e.g. the environment within which consumption behaviour takes place). Despite this, assumptions of children's 'vulnerability' are shared by academics and policymakers alike (Spotswood and Nairn, 2016).

However, in contrast to these assumptions, the commercial world has never assumed that children are inferior to adults in terms of their willingness or ability to consume (Schor, 2005). Marketing practitioners have placed children firmly at the beginning and end of the marketing cycle for over fifty years (Mittal, Griskevicius and Haws, 2020) and continue to invest significant resources into the pursuit of understanding them as 'empowered' as opposed to 'vulnerable' consumers (Cook, 2004; Lapierre, Fleming-Malici, Rozendaal, McAlister and Castonguay, 2017).

Children have long been considered a highly lucrative segment of the marketplace (Robertson and Rossiter, 1974; Kline, 1993; Cook, 2004; Schor, 2005; Boland, Connell and Erickson, 2012; Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2023). Childhood represents a significant stage of life, during which children learn the principles of exchange (Ward, 1974) and begin to form their own meaningful brand preferences and consumption habits (Valkenburg, 2000; Mayo and Nairn, 2009). This is reflected in the use of 'Cradle-to-Grave' marketing strategies (Mittal et al., 2020), which aim to foster relationships between brands and young consumers from an early age in the hope that these remain profitable over a lifetime (Lapierre et al., 2017).

Disney for example, has become one of the world's most valuable brands as a result of its 'Cradle-to-Grave' marketing strategy (Hains, 2012). It aims to create early brand attachment with children through movies, toys and theme parks and capitalise on this by offering

products and experiences that are tailored to various life stages, such as Disney weddings, adult-targeted entertainment (e.g., Marvel or Star Wars) and family holiday packages. The success of this strategy stems from the way Disney leverages nostalgia, cross-generational appeal, and diversified offerings (Hains, 2012), which keep the brand relevant to audiences throughout their lives, ensuring consistent engagement and revenue streams (Mittal et al., 2020).

From a commercial perspective, practitioners have always taken children's preferences and sensibilities seriously. Driven by the analysis of masses of consumer data from large-scale surveys, child-led insight panels, product development and audience-testing sessions (Mayo and Nairn, 2009), marketers readily acknowledge the value that children have as consumers in their own right (Sparrman et al., 2012).

As Kline (1993, p19) observes:

“Marketing's ethnography of childhood has validated children's emotional and fantasy experience... The marketers didn't have to assume that children's daydreams, hero worship, absurdist humour and keen sense of group identity were meaningless distractions or artefacts of immaturity. Rather, they recognised that these attributes were the deep roots of children's culture, which could be employed as effective tools for communicating with them. Identifying the basis of children's experience provided the means for transforming them into a market segment.”

Returning to the TMNT case study described on page 3, this perspective may help to explain why it was so successful as a marketing strategy. The whole idea of four pizza-loving, crime-fighting, anti-heroes; Leonardo, Donatello, Raphael and Michelangelo, being raised in a sewer and taught the fictional art of 'Ninjitsu' by their adoptive father (a Japanese rat called Splinter), was as ridiculous as it was relatable. Nevertheless, it tapped into children's psyches perfectly, which is perhaps why it captured so many imaginations.

Indeed, understanding what appeals to children, how to entice them and how to keep them hooked has always been a priority for practitioners (Kline, 1993). In the 1990s for example, the industry identified another way of segmenting the children's market even further, based on observations of wider social changes in the 20th century, such as children's increased exposure to adult media, early-onset puberty, and increased responsibilities for other siblings in single-parent families (Schor, 2005). It is a phenomenon referred to as 'Kids are Getting

Older Younger' (KGOY) and resulted in the formulation of the "tween" market; comprising children between the ages of 8 and 12 years of age, who are quite literally "in between" the definitions of a child and a teenager (Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017, p21).

In simple terms, 'tweening' involves the strategic repositioning of products previously targeted at teenage children (e.g. products that serve more of a social function than traditional toys such as make-up or beauty products) to make them more appealing to a younger segment of the market (Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017). According to Schor (2005, p56),

"The more the tween consumer world comes to resemble the teen world, with its comprehensive branding strategies and intense levels of consumer immersion, the more money there is to be made".

Ultimately, this "age compression" within the marketplace created a generation of young people that were "far more sophisticated than their predecessors" (Schor, 2005, p56).

1.2.4 The Technological Revolution and the Rise of the "Digital Natives"

Increasing sophistication is a trend that has continued over the last 30 years, especially in terms of technology. From a historical perspective, it is somewhat fascinating that even before use of the Internet became mainstream in society, the 'contemporary' advertising formats *du jour* were considered to "subsume a fantastic panoply of merchandising and communication techniques" (Kline, 1993, p10). It is also interesting to note that even though almost 20 years have passed since Moses and Baldwin (2005, p186) claimed that "children's exposure to advertising is extensive and ever increasing", these observations are arguably still just as valid today as they were then. Perhaps even more so, when we consider how the unprecedented innovation in digital technology has expanded the range of marketing communications tactics available to today's practitioners in ways that could never have been predicted (Hackley and Hackley, 2022).

Indeed, the UK now has one of the biggest digital economies in the world, where online advertising is the main source of revenue for many Internet business models (Jones and Glynn, 2019). All online advertising is digital, but not all digital advertising is online (Gupta, Paul, Stoner and Aggarwal, 2024). Online advertising is characterised by its potential for interaction with the consumer via the receiving device (Harms, et al., 2017). Whereas digital advertising is typically defined in purely technological terms such as "low attention, short

form, high volume and high velocity advertising consumed across multiple platforms” (Hackley and Hackley, 2022, p22).

The key point here is that despite all the advances in advertising techniques facilitated by the digitalisation of the industry, one of the disadvantages is that it has created an oversaturated media environment, where it is increasingly difficult for marketers to capture the attention of consumers (Rohde and Mau, 2021). Hence, traditional and digital communications channels have converged to the point where there are no longer clear distinctions between the two (Freeman and Shapiro, 2014; Oates et al., 2016). Furthermore, there has been a palpable shift in marketing practice towards the use of implicit advertising, which is used “as a device that renders normal...associations that would seem incongruous were they made explicit” (Hackley and Hackley, 2022, p85).

This is particularly evident within the metaverse, described as

“a massively scaled and interoperable network of real-time rendered three-dimensional (3D) virtual worlds that can be experienced synchronously and persistently by an effectively unlimited number of users with an individual sense of presence, and with continuity of data, such as identity, history, entitlements, objects, communications and payments” (Ball, 2022, p29).

Commercialisation has already permeated content on social media (Waqas et al., 2022), video sharing platforms (Loose et al., 2023), online communities and virtual worlds (Meier et al., 2020), video games and mobile apps (Bains, 2024). Inevitably, this has led to a further blurring of the boundaries between the commercialised and entertainment content to which children are exposed in their everyday lives (Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2023). Despite being ultimately intangible, the metaverse appears to be becoming as ‘real’ as the physical universe for today’s children, who are spending increasing amounts of time immersed in online spaces (Vollero et al., 2021). Therefore, it is important to consider that *all* forms of contemporary media have the potential to be connected to marketing or advertising in some way (Hackley and Hackley, 2022).

When conducting research in the context of the contemporary media environment, it ought to be acknowledged that an oversaturated marketplace has contributed to the emergence of a new type of consumer, who typically belongs to ‘Generation Z’ (i.e. children born between the mid-to-late 1990s and the early 2010s), or ‘Generation Alpha’ (i.e. children born between the early 2010s and the mid 2020s). Often referred to as “digital natives” (Chang and Chang, 2023, p1), these children are introduced to various entertainment and educational digital applications from as young as two years old (Ofcom, 2024). “Digital natives” grow up in a hyper-connected world and continue to eschew more traditional forms of entertainment such as watching television (Zarouali et al., 2018), and playing with physical toys (Jaakkola, 2019), in favour of connecting with the world online via their electronic devices (De Jans et al., 2018; De Vierman et al., 2019). These children have higher expectations (Thangavel et al., 2019), are much more informed and demanding than their predecessors (Vollero et al., 2021) and are more likely to be influenced by digital media than older generations (Childers and Boatwright, 2021).

Despite being extremely confident in their ability to navigate the digital environment (Chang and Chang, 2023), a growing body of evidence suggests that children have considerable difficulty in recognising embedded or implicit forms of digital advertising (Freeman and Shapiro, 2014; Lawlor et al., 2016), which are becoming more commonplace online (Harms et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Hudders et al., 2021). Whilst the underlying commercial agenda is still present in embedded advertising, many of the techniques are personalised, entertaining and highly immersive. This presents a theoretical problem for researchers because the sales approach of embedded advertising is more indirect and much harder to identify (Hudders et al., 2017; Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, 2018; Lampert et al., 2021; Castonguay and Messina, 2022a). This is also problematic for policymakers, because it is much harder to moderate and regulate embedded advertising effectively (van Reijmersdal and Rozendaal, 2020).

Indeed, it is evident that those who hold the responsibility for advertising regulation in the UK (and indeed across the world) acknowledge that entertainment and informative content online is often heavily integrated with advertising (van Reijmersdal and Rozendaal, 2020). Hence, they remain focused on addressing the issue of the increasing ubiquity of commercialisation within the contemporary media environment, whilst also recognising the theoretical and practical challenges that this presents (Nelson, 2018).

1.3 Identifying the Research Opportunity

Indeed, there have been calls for researchers to revisit existing conceptualisations of children's advertising literacy that rely on recognition, in light of increasingly digital media lifestyles and the shift towards more implicit, embedded forms of advertising (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012; De Jans et al., 2017; Nelson, 2018). Clearly, there is a theoretical problem presented by previous research that has mainly focused on children's ability to distinguish advertising from other media formats, based on the ability to recognise its commercial agenda (Buijzen et al., 2010).

The literature maintains that 'critical responses' to advertising manifest in the form of negative attitudes, namely 'scepticism' and 'disliking of advertising' (Hudders et al., 2017). When activated by the recognition of advertising, these attitudes are thought to reduce a person's susceptibility to unwanted advertising effects, and may diminish the desire to purchase the featured product or service (Vanwesenbeeck, Walrave and Ponnet, 2016; Sekarasih, Scharrer, Olson, Onut and Lanthorn, 2018). However, despite the amount of research that adopts these assumptions, there is actually very little empirical evidence to support this view (Moses and Baldwin, 2005; Lapierre, 2019).

Therefore, this thesis contends that if research continues to conceptualise advertising literacy in terms of resistance or defence, it may restrict the enhancement of theory and the creation of new knowledge in the field. For example, scholars still lack an adequate explanation as to why advertising can still be persuasive for adults and children alike (Rozendaal et al., 2009; Isaac and Grayson, 2017), despite the amount of research on children's advertising literacy that has been conducted over the last 50 years. Recent research has sought to address this, highlighting the implicit nature of contemporary advertising and suggesting that these formats are more effective at persuasion because they bypass the triggering of recognition. Initially, this explanation appears to make sense. However, whilst it may be logical, it is also quite reductive. For instance, by suggesting that the persuasion attempts are more effective when they are less noticeable, it reinforces the idea that recognition plays a critical role in reducing one's susceptibility to commercial persuasion.

Hence, it is still the case that there are no adequate explanations as to why advertising can still be persuasive, particularly in situations where consumers do recognise advertising and are fully aware of its commercial agenda.

At present, there is very little evidence to provide support for the counter argument that children may respond to advertisements with positive attitudes (Hudders et al., 2017), even in instances where they recognise that they are being targeted (Panic et al., 2013) and may still be able to evaluate the commercial message of an advertisement, which may not necessarily result in a reduction in purchase intention. If it is the case that attitude towards advertising is as important as having knowledge of advertising in reducing susceptibility to persuasion (Rozendaal et al., 2011), then this would suggest that researchers need to focus on other factors affecting attitudinal dimensions of advertising literacy, for example how much children actually like the content (Lampert et al., 2021). It is plausible to suggest that popular advertisements may be more effective at persuasion compared to unpopular ones, regardless of the level of advertising knowledge possessed (Roberts, 1983). Research could benefit from exploring the specific advertising features or characteristics that lead to positive or negative attitudes towards advertising (De Pelsmacker et al., 2002; Van Reijmersdal, Smit and Neijens, 2010; Castonguay and Messina, 2022a).

Another issue centres on how to define the form and function of children's advertising literacy as a concept. As is emphasised throughout this thesis, there remains disagreement amongst scholars as to what advertising knowledge actually consists of (Ritson and Elliot, 1999; Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Malmelin, 2010; Nelson, 2018), how to measure it (Ham, Nelson and Das, 2015; Rozendaal, Oprea and Buijzen, 2016; Boerman, van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal and Lima, 2018) and ongoing debates surrounding how this knowledge is actually applied in practice (Rozendaal et al., 2011; Hudders et al., 2017). As such, there is a lack of consistent evidence as to what advertising literacy is and how it affects the way that children interpret and respond to advertising in its various formats (Moses and Baldwin, 2005; Nairn and Dew, 2007; Lawlor et al., 2016; Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2023).

From a policy point of view, there is also a practical issue in terms of regulating advertising in the contemporary media environment, where many embedded forms of advertising are deliberately designed not to be recognised. Hence, there are questions over the relevance of

current advertising restrictions, which are largely based upon research into the one-way, didactic ‘push’ format of traditional communications channels such as print media, radio and television (Buijzen et al., 2010; Dahlen and Rosengren, 2016).

Another problem with current advertising restrictions and regulations is that they are largely based on children’s age and their assumed competencies and very little else (Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005). Some scholars argue that this approach is “unwarranted” because there is actually very limited empirical evidence to support it (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006, p1). Very few studies make direct comparisons between adults and children in terms of their respective advertising understanding (Wright et al., 2005) and there is conflicting evidence suggesting that children’s ability to understand advertising continues to develop up to and beyond the age of 16 years (Zarouali et al., 2020).

Critics argue that this perspective “posits children as incomplete, less-than-knowledgeable beings whose movement is toward an assumed or desired state of being or knowing” (Cook, 2008, p233). It presents a narrow view of “the child” that leads to similarly constrained views of “the market” and ultimately “what constitutes consumption” (Cook, 2014, p64). Hence, this “universalistic” view of childhood is becoming increasingly contested by academic experts across disciplines including marketing (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008) and sociology (Sparman et al., 2012, p10).

Therefore, there is an opportunity for this PhD research to address the increasing convergence of traditional and digital techniques and the blurring of boundaries between commercialised and entertainment content (Freeman and Shapiro, 2014) by exploring a range of contemporary advertising formats and “the integrated and interactive nature of the commercial messages in them” (Oates, Watkins and Thyne, 2016, p1970). In doing so, this thesis seeks to enhance existing understanding of the nature of children’s advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment.

A better understanding of the impacts of the commercialised media environment on children’s lives should be considered essential by everyone who is involved in promoting the healthy development of children and adolescents (Rideout et al., 2010). This naturally includes the people who have close relationships with children, such as parents, caregivers, and teachers, but it also applies to the “commercial organisations, policy makers and

researchers” who have their own vested interests in children’s marketing (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008, p638).

Arguably, an appreciation of children's culture and everything that it embodies should be considered fundamental to understanding the commercialisation of contemporary media and its impact on children and young people. However, academic advertising research has rarely considered children’s agency as competent consumers with their own material wants, desires and needs. In other words, current conceptualisations do not really empower children as consumers.

This thesis shares this view and argues that to better understand socially-responsible marketing, there needs to be more research on children’s perceptions of advertising as it exists in the contemporary media environment, where many “persuasion attempts blend seamlessly into everyday discourse” (Freeman and Shapiro, 2014, p35). New research needs to decode children’s increasingly digital lifestyles and adopt a more balanced view of children as consumers by exploring the broader social, cultural, and economic contexts in which children engage with advertising.

1.4 Research Aim

As such, this was a key consideration in development of this PhD study where the core aim was to shift the focus of the research from the individual child to the environment within which consumption takes place by making a conscious effort to ‘get to know’ participants as young consumers, to acknowledge, appreciate and represent their consumer voices. In other words, to undertake research that was aligned with the way children’s marketers develop their commercial strategies.

With this in mind, the aim of this research was to explore children’s advertising literacy from their own perspectives. In such a way that not only recognises the importance of empowering children as consumers in their own right but that also acknowledges the need to protect them from the risks of deceptive, harmful or misleading commercialised communications.

Therefore, there was a strong case for the use of a qualitative, interpretative methodology in this PhD research, which

“has proven to be particularly well suited to the task of “knowing children” on their own terms... as beings in the here and now, who engage in the world and make sense of it in their own ways”(Cook 2009, p274).

In doing so, this thesis seeks to shed light on if and where there is legitimate cause for concern about children’s exposure to advertising in the contemporary media environment but also if, and where there might be the possibility for advertising exposure to have positive impacts on children in today’s society. Hence, this research intervenes in ongoing debates about the commercialisation of childhood, the complexity of children’s culture and the pernicious nature of child-targeted marketing in all its forms.

1.5 Research Objectives

This PhD research helps to reframe the debate by pursuing the specific objectives outlined below:

- To explore children’s awareness and perceptions of contemporary advertising formats (RQ1)
- To explore the nature of children’s advertising literacy from a sociological perspective as a guide for future decisions on advertising policy, responsible advertising practice and ethically-grounded regulations (RQ2 and RQ3)
- To develop a conceptual framework of children’s advertising literacy, which can be used to guide future research in the context of the contemporary media environment (RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3).

1.6 Structure of this Thesis

This PhD thesis consists of six Chapters, including this introduction, which are briefly outlined below in Section 1.6.1.

1.6.1 Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Chapter 2 presents a review of a large volume of literature relating to children’s advertising literacy, illustrating how the topic has evolved within academic research over time. It seeks to highlighting areas of consensus and disagreement between marketing scholars and marketing practitioners. This Chapter also draws upon literature from another social science discipline; sociology, to explain the reasoning

behind the decision to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to the study of advertising literacy in this PhD research. Conceptual and empirical findings relating to children's consumption are discussed in terms of where there are theoretical overlaps between the two disciplines and what sociology can bring to the study of advertising literacy. The body of evidence reviewed in the following Chapter was used to develop the three central research questions addressed in this thesis (see Section 1.6.1.1 below), which are also reflected in the initial conceptual framework (introduced as Figure 2.5).

1.6.1.1 Research Questions

- RQ1: *What are children's perceptions of contemporary advertising formats?*
- RQ2: *What can a sociological perspective on consumption reveal about the nature of children's advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment?*
- RQ3: *How is children's advertising literacy enacted in practice?*

1.6.2 Chapter 3.0 - Methodology

Chapter 3 describes the methodological approach adopted in this PhD research. It begins by presenting the researcher's own philosophical assumptions and considers how these align with an overall exploratory research strategy. This Chapter also argues the case for interdisciplinary approaches to the creation of new knowledge. This Chapter reflects upon the various decisions involved in the creation of the research design (as illustrated in Figure 3.1), providing further justification for the qualitative methods that were chosen. Data was collected in two phases, which combined the use of creative workshops with semi-structured group interviews. The Chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical issues associated with children's research and explains how these were managed throughout the research process.

1.6.3 Chapter 4.0 - Findings

Chapter 4 presents the main findings from this PhD research. First, the overall nature of each theme is introduced followed by an explanation of how the three themes relate to the original research questions. This is supported by further examination of each theme in terms of its underlying sub-themes, which are exemplified through the use of participants' quotations and the relevant insights from the data. Third, the Chapter concludes with a summary of the most significant findings from the research project.

1.6.4 Chapter 5.0 - Discussion

Chapter 5 articulates the overall value of this PhD research. In this Chapter, the main lines of philosophical and epistemological reasoning are unified with the most significant findings to provide context for the theoretical and methodological contributions of this thesis.

1.6.5 Chapter 6.0 - Conclusions

Chapter 6 concludes this PhD thesis by bringing together the key contributions of this work and by evaluating the overall success of the project in terms of the original research objectives. This Chapter also highlights the practical outcomes of this research, which includes evidence-based implications for policy makers regarding current advertising regulations and restrictions in the UK, and recommendations for practitioners on how to embed socially-responsible principles into child-targeted marketing practice. This Chapter also concludes with the researcher's reflections on the limitations of this work and suggestions for future research.

1.6.6 References

A full list of references relating to all the sources mentioned within this thesis can be found on pages 360-403.

1.6.7 Appendices

All supplementary material referred to in this thesis are indexed in the appendix, which can be found at the end of this thesis on pages 404-426.

Chapter 2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Within social sciences research, it is generally accepted that there are a number of different ways to conduct a literature review depending on the nature of the phenomenon to be studied (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010). The literature review is presented at the beginning of the thesis as a way of framing the research project (Luker, 2010), defining its topical focus (Rhodes, 2011), and presenting “a critical summary and assessment of the range of existing materials dealing with knowledge and understanding in a given field” (Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, 2010, p123). In other words, the purpose of the literature review is to provide an overview of the current state of thinking relating to the topic under exploration and to illustrate the theoretical scope and provide context for the overall thesis (Boote and Beile, 2005).

In addition to being a key starting point for any research project, it is also important to maintain a current knowledge base within the relevant disciplines so that new studies can be situated appropriately. Thus, reviewing the literature is an ongoing process, whereby new findings and developments are integrated into the thesis as and when new research is published.

2.1.1 Structure of this Chapter

This PhD research is unique in its exploration of children’s advertising literacy because it adopts an interdisciplinary approach to the study. Hence, this Chapter draws upon a large body of literature relating to conceptual and empirical research from both marketing and sociology. Whilst these are traditionally viewed as two separate disciplines within the social sciences, they are not entirely unrelated to each other. Both disciplines share similarities in terms of research on children and childhood, where elements of marketing theory and consumption theory overlap. This research also examines academic evidence from other relevant fields including media psychology and communications studies. In addition to critiquing academic research, this Chapter also considers evidence from non-academic sources i.e. ‘grey literature’, such as industry reports, regulatory guidelines and policy documents relating to children and advertising.

This Chapter is structured into three main sections. It begins with Section 2.2, which examines children's advertising literacy theory by analysing evidence from both historical and contemporary literature. The purpose is to understand how the topic has evolved over time and to highlight areas of consensus and disagreement in academic research between scholars and identify where there are gaps in existing knowledge.

In Section 2.3, the focus is on understanding the contemporary media environment in more depth as the overall context for this PhD study. It aims to build on the previous discussion of advertising theory (Section 2.2), by concentrating more on the complexity of current advertising practice. As such, this section examines a wide range of traditional and digital advertising strategies, offline and online media formats and examines the differences between explicit and implicit communications tactics.

In Section 2.4, the review moves on to sociological literature and examines the intersections between children's advertising research and children's consumption research. It looks at key elements of Consumer Culture Theory and considers the potential application of sociological concepts in this study of children's advertising literacy.

Overall, the literature review serves two purposes. First, it identifies where there are gaps in existing understanding, which form the basis of the three research questions posed in this thesis (Section 1.6.1.1.) Second, it provides context for the development of the conceptual framework used to guide this PhD research, introduced as Figure 2.5 on page 115. This initial framework is revisited in light of the findings presented in Chapter 4, resulting in a revised conceptual framework presented as Figure 5.1 in Chapter 5 on page 284.

2.2 Children’s Understanding of Commercial Persuasion: Advertising literacy, Persuasion Knowledge and Proto-competencies - a Deluge of Definitions

As highlighted in the introductory Chapter (Section 1.1), over the last five decades many scholars have raised a plethora of concerns surrounding the ethics of child-targeted marketing, with a specific focus on the use of increasingly sophisticated and potentially deceptive advertising tactics and the purported negative effects on children. Hence, a significant amount of research has focused on understanding children’s “advertising literacy” (Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005, p223) that is their ability to recognise and process advertising attempts (Robertson and Rossiter, 1974; Roberts, 1982; Young, 1990; John, 1999; Moses and Baldwin, 2005), and ways to improve it (Rozendaal, Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2011; Nelson, 2018; Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2023), to address these concerns as outlined earlier in Section 1.1 (Cook, 2004b; De Jans, Van de Sompel, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2019).

Broadly speaking, research in this area has focused on two issues. The first relates to a question of *when* children develop different levels of understanding and how these can be conceptualised “to determine exactly when children are able to understand that commercial messages are specifically designed to persuade audiences and encourage purchasing behaviours” (Lapierre, 2015, p423). Previous studies have attempted to clarify the age at which children can realistically “cope” with advertising attempts (Moses and Baldwin, 2005, p187) and process them “in a conscious and critical way” (Rozendaal, Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2011, p329) to establish the age at which it is considered fair to target them commercially. Despite being unequivocal (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006, this evidence has played an important role in informing UK advertising policy, reflected in current advertising regulations and restrictions, which are largely based upon children’s age and very little else.

The second issue centres on *how* to define the form and function of children’s advertising literacy as a concept. As emphasised throughout this thesis, there remains disagreement amongst scholars as to what advertising knowledge actually consists of (Ritson and Elliot, 1999; Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Malmelin, 2010; Nelson, 2018), how to measure it (Ham, Nelson and Das, 2015; Rozendaal, Oprea and Buijzen, 2016; Boerman, van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal and Lima, 2018) and ongoing debates surrounding how this knowledge is actually applied in practice (Rozendaal et al., 2011; Hudders et al., 2017). As such, there is a lack of consistent evidence as to what advertising literacy is and how it affects

the way that children interpret and respond to advertising in its various formats (Moses and Baldwin, 2005; Nairn and Dew, 2007; Lawlor et al., 2016; Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2023).

One explanation for this could be that even though the topic has received a considerable level of attention over the last five decades, there remains a number of conceptual and theoretical inconsistencies within children's advertising literacy research (Young, 1990; Kunkel, 2010; Rozendaal, Oprea, and Buijzen 2016; Zarouali et al., 2019).

As Young (1990, p39) describes;

“The research literature on children and advertising should not be regarded as a series of detached experimental investigations. There is much empirical work and dangerously little theory, and this has led to some muddled thinking and conceptual confusion during the years when most of the research was published.”

Indeed, 20 years after Young's (1990) critique, Kunkel (2010, p111) also observed that there was still “a lack of consistency in both conceptual and operational definitions for measuring children's understanding of commercial intent”. This inconsistency still exists and presents a real challenge for new research, in that there is no single, universally-accepted conceptualisation of children's advertising literacy on which to build (Nelson, 2016; De Jans et al., 2019). This issue is discussed in more detail in this section, where it is acknowledged that multiple frameworks, models and scales of advertising literacy exist, each comprising various different factors and dimensions.

In cases like this where such large bodies of literature exist, researchers may choose to rely upon a limited number of well-known studies or just focus on the most recent work within the field (Paul and Criado, 2020). Hence, there is a risk that historical, yet significant work might be overlooked. Therefore, despite it not being necessary to conduct a literature review in chronological order (Galvan and Galvan, 2017), it is considered to be an appropriate structure for the following Section here (2.2.1) because the origins and evolution of advertising literacy as a concept can be traced allowing areas of theoretical consensus and disagreement to be identified.

2.2.1 The Origins of Advertising Literacy

Academic interest in children's understanding of persuasion began to emerge in the 1960s, even though this was many years before mass advertising became common practice and the term ‘advertising literacy’ was introduced (Young, 1990). Early research predominantly

focused upon children's cognitive processing of communications (Livingstone and Helpser, 2006) and was heavily influenced by psychological research at the time, most notably Piaget's (1960) 'Ages and Stages' model of child development (Bartholomew and O'Donohoe, 2003; Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008; Sparrman, Sandin and Sjöberg, 2012).

2.2.1.1 1960s Cognitive Developmental Psychology

Piaget's (1960) research suggested that children's cognitive capacity develops in a linear fashion through predetermined stages from birth to adulthood. Yet it is important to note that Piaget's (1960) original focus was children's psychological development, *not* their ability to understand advertising. However, because persuasion understanding is often framed as a cognitive skill (Lapierre, 2015), it is unsurprising that three of Piaget's (1960) stages; the 'preoperational stage' (ages 2-7 years), the 'concrete operational stage' (ages 7-12 years) and the 'formal operational stage' (age 12 years and upwards) have since been adopted by researchers as the theoretical basis for explaining how children gradually develop an "adult-like" understanding of advertising as they mature (Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005, p223). Some of the most well-known conceptualisations of children's advertising literacy such as John's (1999) model, are referred to as 'cognitive' theories or models in the literature (Lapierre, 2019). This is because of their roots in children's cognitive developmental psychology (Nelson, 2018) and their relevance in explaining the cognitive effects of advertising on children (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2000).

There is widespread agreement that until they reach the point of adolescence, a child's understanding of advertising is less sophisticated than that of an adult (Friestad and Wright, 1994; John, 1999; Kunkel, Wilcox, Cantor, Palmer, Linn and Dowrick, 2004; Verhellen et al., 2014). This lack of sophisticated knowledge means that;

“young children: (a) [experience] great difficulty in distinguishing [television] programs from commercial content, and; (b) [lack] the ability to recognize and take into account the selling purpose and persuasive nature of advertising” (Kunkel, 1987, p4).

2.2.1.2 1970s - Children's Understanding of 'Attributional Intent'

At the beginning of 1970s, studies focused on understanding “the development of patterns and of thinking and behaving which comprise consumer behaviour [in childhood]” (Ward, 1974, p1) as a way of predicting future consumption patterns in adults. Children's

advertising research continued to be influenced by Piaget's (1960) work. It was becoming clearer that two information-processing skills (i.e. the ability to recognise an advertisement and the ability to comprehend its selling agenda) were particularly important cognitive dimensions of commercial understanding.

The 1970s also witnessed one of the most significant developments in media history, which was the introduction of children as a captive new audience for advertisers through the medium of television (Schor, 2005). Understandably, as television programmes became more engaging, children spent more of their free time watching television. Not only did this allow advertisers to target children directly, but it also presented a wealth of opportunities to reach parents too during peak family viewing times. As such, there was a shift in research focus towards children's understanding of television advertising specifically. Some of the earliest studies on this medium were conducted by Robertson and Rossiter (1974, p13), who were interested in understanding "children's attributions about the intent of television commercials" by applying Attribution Theory; a theory of perception by which individuals make sense of their "subjective environment through subjectively operative causal processes" (Kelley, 1967, p193). Robertson and Rossiter (1974) investigated children's understanding of the purposes of television advertising and how this affects their attitudes and subsequent purchase requests.

Off the back of these experiments, Robertson and Rossiter (1974, p13) introduced the concept of 'attributional intent', suggesting it can be broken down into two separate forms; 1) "Assistive intent", which relates to the awareness "that advertisements tell you about things" and 2) "Persuasive intent", which refers to the understanding that "advertisements try to make you buy things" (Robertson and Rossiter, 1974, p13).

2.2.1.3 1970s - Consumer Socialisation

The 1970s also saw the emergence of consumer socialisation research, defined by Ward (1974, p2) as "the processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace." Essentially, this definition suggests that children's cognitive development is just one part of the overall process that children go through in becoming competent consumers. As Ward (1974, p3) stated, it is also important for researchers

“to understand how children acquire attitudes about the social significance of goods, or more precisely, how people learn to perceive that the acquisition of some kinds of products or brands... can be instrumental to successful social role enactment”

Ward's (1974) statement highlights how important it is for advertising researchers to examine children's consumption in a broader sense, taking into account additional dimensions of persuasion understanding such as the influence of early relationships.

From a sociological perspective, this makes sense if one considers the close interrelation between the practice of marketing and the process of consumption. For example, Corsaro (1992) suggests a need for an interpretive approach to a theory of consumer socialisation that moves away from a focus on the “endpoint of development” (p161). There is also an argument that there needs to be a shift from a linear to a reproductive perspective on socialisation because people “do not suddenly become consumers as young adults or teenagers” (Cook, 2004a, p145).

These early studies have undoubtedly shaped children's advertising research. For example, the concept of “assistive” intent eventually evolved into what is now more commonly known as ‘selling intent’ but is still centred on the awareness that an advertisement has been created deliberately to try to sell something to its audience (Moses and Baldwin, 2005). Recognising the selling intent of commercialised communications remains an important dimension of advertising literacy, in that it helps children to distinguish advertising from other forms of communication (Young, 1990). However, it should not be seen as critical to the way children interpret advertisements (Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005). An understanding of selling intent may be one of the key skills involved in enabling children to recognise an advertisement's form and its basic function (Moses and Baldwin, 2005) but may not be as important as a more sophisticated appreciation of ‘persuasive’ intent in the development of advertising literacy (Robertson and Rossiter, 1974).

2.2.1.4 1980s - Persuasive Intent as a Hallmark of Advertising Literacy

However, recognition of selling intent alone may not influence the way that children actually interpret advertisements (Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005). Evidence suggests that an appreciation of ‘persuasive’ intent is more significant in terms of developing a critical attitude towards advertising (Young, 1990). Recognition of persuasive intent enables children to adjust their “interpretation” of media material accordingly (Kunkel, 2010, p109).

Understanding of persuasive intent may develop later than an understanding of selling intent because by its nature, it represents a more complex level of understanding (Oates, Blades and Gunter, 2002; Moses and Baldwin, 2005).

Roberts (1982) suggested that there are four underlying constructs that distinguish persuasive intent from selling intent: 1) that the source of any commercial message has an alternative perspective to the receiver. 2) the source intends to persuade the receiver, 3) all persuasive messages are biased to some degree and 4) persuasive messages need to be interpreted in a different way to informational (i.e. selling) messages by the receiver. Roberts' (1982) work was designed to clarify ambiguities in earlier research, yet little research has applied or tested his model empirically since (Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005). Perhaps this is because Roberts' (1982) definition represents an idealised, as opposed to realistic level of understanding of persuasive intent, because many adults “never evidence such comprehension [of advertising]” either (Roberts, 1982, p26). Nevertheless, persuasive intent is still commonly defined in terms of advertiser's intention to encourage purchasing behaviours by influencing consumers' thoughts or perceptions with carefully crafted, commercially-motivated messages (Roberts, 1982; Young, 1990, Moses and Baldwin, 2005; Lapierre, 2015). Indeed, multiple studies over the last four decades have maintained that children need to grasp the concept of persuasive intent in order to develop competency in advertising literacy (Oates, Blades and Gunter, 2002; Lawlor and Prothero, 2008; Kunkel, 2010; Carter et al., 2011; Lapierre, 2019; Spielvogel et al., 2021).

As a paradigm, developmentalism (encompassing both cognitive development and consumer socialisation perspectives) has provided a useful steer for advertising research in the past (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008) However, the “Piagetian” approach [to children's understanding of commercial persuasion] “is not especially helpful” in explaining how children actually *interpret* advertising (Moses and Baldwin, 2005, p186, emphasis added). This view that children's understanding of advertising is inferior to that possessed by adults appears to be one of the few areas of consensus within the advertising literacy literature but also one of the most contested (Livingstone and Helpers, 2006; Lapierre, 2019; Zarouali, Verdoodt, Walrave, Poels, Ponnet and Lievens, 2020).

2.2.2 The Form of Advertising Literacy

Despite multiple inconsistencies in the literature (Young, 1990; Kunkel, 2010; Zarouali et al., 2019), there does appear to a common theme across research into children’s understanding of advertising, which is that they centre around the concept of literacy in some form. It is possible to dissect this even further, for example by questioning what is meant by the term ‘literacy’ in the traditional sense.

Generally speaking, the term ‘literacy’ is used to imply a certain level of competency or knowledge within a particular area of learning. It has most often been used in the context of children’s language acquisition, referring to the ability to read, write and comprehend texts (O’Donohoe and Tynan, 1998) so that people can learn to communicate effectively and make sense of the world. Basic literacy requires that one must first be able to ‘read’ in order to simply decode textual information. Following that, one must be also able to make sense of textual information and understand its meaning, in other words its purpose or intent. However, true literacy in the traditional sense, is thought to be demonstrated by the ability to reproduce or write a text in a form that others can decode, process and understand (Bartholomew and O’Donohoe, 2003; Malmelin, 2010). Therefore, drawing parallels between advertising literacy, as it is most commonly understood, and literacy in the traditional sense (summarised in Table 2.1) could help researchers reach a common ground in terms of defining the form and function of advertising literacy.

Table 2.1 Different Forms of Literacy

Traditional Literacy	Informational Literacy	Visual/ Aesthetic Literacy	Rhetorical Literacy	Advertising Literacy	Media Literacy	Digital Literacy
Identify words (recognition)	Identify sources of information and knowledge	Focus on design and entertainment	Identify means and tactics of persuasion	Identify advertising (recognition)	Identify different media formats	Awareness of digital technology, smart devices
Understand what words mean (comprehension)	Ability to use various sources of information	Understand forms of auditory and visual expression	Understand the strategies and purpose of persuasion	Understand the underlying commercial intent (comprehension)	Understand the media	Understand different uses of digital technologies
Connect words and their	Evaluate correctness of	Understand styles, stories	Knowledge of	Application - critical and	Understand the	Competence with

Traditional Literacy	Informational Literacy	Visual/Aesthetic Literacy	Rhetorical Literacy	Advertising Literacy	Media Literacy	Digital Literacy
meaning (fluency)	information	and symbols	targeting, commercial agendas	conscious processing of advertising knowledge	purpose and messaging in different media	modern, digital technology

(Source: Buckingham, 2005; Marsh, 2005; Rozendaal et al., 2009; Malmelin, 2010).

2.2.2.1 1990s - The Introduction of Advertising Literacy and Persuasion Knowledge

The concept of ‘advertising literacy’ and its emphasis on persuasive intent as a separate, and arguably more important, concept than selling intent (Young 1990; Moses and Baldwin, 2005; Kunkel, 2010) is central to this PhD research, having received the most significant amount of scholarly attention over the last 30 years (Boerman et al., 2018). First introduced in the 1990s, ‘Advertising literacy’ was originally presented as a one-dimensional concept encompassing conceptual knowledge about advertising (Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005; Rozendaal, Lapierre, van Reijmersdal and Buijzen, 2011; Hudders et al., 2017; Zarouali, Verdoodt, Walrave, Poels, Ponnet and Lievens, 2020).

At this point, researchers began to develop more detailed explanations of persuasion understanding. One of the most well-known conceptualisations relates to the “Persuasion Knowledge Model”, which was introduced into the literature by Friestad and Wright in 1994. Since its introduction, the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright, 1994) has become one of the most common theoretical lenses through which both adults’ and children’s persuasion comprehension has been studied (Panic et al., 2013; Ham, Nelson and Das, 2015; Boerman et al., 2018).

The model itself is complex, going beyond the two cognitive skills outlined so far (i.e. recognition of selling and persuasive intent). The PKM focuses on how a person’s beliefs about the marketplace evolve into implicit beliefs about persuasion over time, recognising three distinct “knowledge structures”; i.e. Persuasion, Agent and Topic knowledge (Ham et al., 2015, p18). Overall, persuasion knowledge consists of “personal knowledge” about persuasive attempts that result from exposure to multiple types of persuasion in everyday life (Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005). Its core function is to help people “interpret and cope with marketers’ sales presentations” (Friestad and Wright, 1994,

p1) by enabling them to recognise particular features of advertisements, deconstruct commercial messages and anticipate the effect these may have on them (Friestad and Wright, 1994, p3). Over time, researchers have used various different concepts and scales of persuasion knowledge, that tend to be either “conceptual or evaluative in nature” (Boerman et al., 2018, p673), meaning that the ways in which the PKM is and has been applied and how persuasion knowledge itself has been measured varies widely across the marketing discipline. This might explain why there is no standard measure of persuasion knowledge within the literature (Ham, Nelson and Das, 2015).

On reflection, the term ‘persuasion knowledge’ also appears to be used interchangeably with ‘advertising literacy’ throughout the extant literature, which has likely contributed to the disparity in terms used by researchers as highlighted by Wright, Friestad and Boush (2005) and Kunkel (2010). Some clarification is offered by Nelson (2016, p171) who asserts that the form of persuasion knowledge that is related to advertising should be referred to as “advertising literacy”. Despite its enduring popularity in marketing research, some scholars argue that the PKM has been somewhat “overlooked” as a developmental model in advertising research with children (Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005, p226). Perhaps this is because it presents a much broader perspective of how people continue to develop their persuasion knowledge throughout their lives, as opposed to an age-based competency perspective, which assumes an end-point or finite level of understanding is reached in adolescence.

2.2.2.2 Late 1990s - Enhancing Advertising Literacy Theory: Returning to Consumer Socialisation Research

Indeed, one of the most significant pieces of work in this field was published in 1999 by Deborah Roedder John who conducted a highly influential review of 25 years of research into children’s consumer behaviour. Consolidating the findings from vast amounts of cognitive and social development literature, John’s (1999) work explains when children acquire the necessary cognitive capacity to become competent at recognising and reading persuasive attempts and also how they develop more critical attitudes to consumption.

Like Piaget (1960), John (1999) also proposes that children progress through three distinct age-related stages of development, namely a ‘perceptual’ stage (ages 3 - 7), an ‘analytical’ stage, (ages 7 - 11) and a ‘reflective’ stage (ages 11 - 16). With progression through each

stage, “age-related improvements in cognitive abilities contribute to the development of consumer knowledge and decision-making skills” (John, 1999, p184). In other words, children learn to become consumers through a process of socialisation as they age. By the time they reach adolescence, children become more capable of abstract thinking and more aware of the social significance of commodities (John, 1999). As such, their ability to understand advertising, brands and products “beyond a surface level” increases (John, 1999 p187). Furthermore, as children reach the ‘reflective stage’ of development they also develop more sceptical attitudes towards commercially-motivated messages and are presumed to have an adult-like understanding of advertising by the age of 12 (John, 1999).

In that respect, adolescent children are considered to be much less vulnerable to the influence of advertising than younger children as noted earlier (Friestad and Wright, 1994; John, 1999; Kunkel et al., 2004; Cai and Zhao, 2013; Verhellen et al., 2014). Indeed, recent research continues to support the validity of John’s (1999) stages of children’s consumer socialisation even within the context of the contemporary media environment (Andrews, Walker and Kees, 2020). Hence, this might explain why advertising literacy researchers have tended to favour John’s (1999) theory of consumer socialisation, with over 2500 citations within the literature to date. As a result, one of the most dominant assumptions in the literature is that a child’s conceptual understanding of advertising is comparable to an adult’s by the age of 12. Despite this, some scholars have argued that this widely-held assumption is “unwarranted” because there is actually very limited empirical evidence to support it (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006, p1).

Indeed, very few studies have explored if and how advertising literacy continues to develop into adolescence and beyond the age of 12 (Zarouali et al., 2020). As noted earlier, a key question for researchers relates to *when* children develop different levels of understanding, in order to establish the age at which it is considered fair to target them commercially. Hence, in the context of providing evidence that can help to protect children from unwanted advertising effects and regulate the industry effectively, it is understandable that researchers continually focus on children under the age 12 as opposed to older adolescents and young adults.

2.2.2.3 2000s - Theory of Mind: An Alternative Approach to Advertising Understanding?

In addition to cognitive developmental and consumer socialisation approaches to advertising literacy discussed so far, scholars have proposed Theory of Mind as an alternative lens for examining persuasion understanding (Moses and Baldwin, 2005; Lapierre, 2015; Jones and Glynn, 2019). Theory of Mind considers the ability to appreciate others' perspectives and mental states (McAlister and Cornwell, 2009). An ability that is also important for developing persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright, 1994) and matures throughout childhood (Lapierre, 2015). As such, Theory of Mind is an essential requirement for understanding that advertisers attempt to change one's mental state, i.e. recognising persuasive intent (Moses and Baldwin, 2005). Between the ages of 7-11 years children start to understand others' perspectives and begin to appreciate that advertisements may have an agenda other than to entertain (Cai and Zhao, 2013).

Children as young as five years old have shown an appreciation of the persuasive intent of advertising, when this is measured indirectly. For instance, by asking them to choose a picture from a selection that best illustrates what they think an advertisement wants them to do (McAlister and Cornwell, 2009). However, the suggestion that young children can have such a 'robust' understanding of persuasive intent has been challenged. For example, Ali and Blades (2014) argue that children may have been able to select the correct picture in McAlister and Cornwell's (2009) study simply because they were able to recognise the well-known brands and logos used in the stimulus materials (e.g. correctly pairing the KFC logo with an image depicting a person eating fried chicken). Perhaps children were able to choose the correct picture through association and prior experience of the activity rather than as a result of their advertising knowledge (Ali and Blades, 2014).

Despite this, later research has suggested that Theory of Mind can offer an explanation as to why children have meaningful interactions with brands (Jones and Glynn, 2019). Based on Theory of Mind's central presumption that it allows children to understand different mental viewpoints (McAlister and Cornwell, 2009) it also enables them to understand that the symbolic nature of brands can mean different things to different people. Brands can symbolise different desirable states, such as prestige and coolness (Jones and Glynn, 2019, p93). In this way, Theory of Mind may also help to provide an explanation as to how moral advertising literacy develops in children (De Pauw et al., 2019), in that it affirms that moral

development varies greatly depending on the individual child (McAlister and Cornwell, 2009). However, compared to the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright, 1994), Theory of Mind appears to be used much less frequently as a theoretical basis for research into children's understanding of advertising (Lapierre, 2015; Loose et al., 2023).

2.2.2.4 Advertising Literacy - The Shift from One Dimensional to Multidimensional Concept

What *is* clear from the literature discussed so far is that conceptual knowledge about advertising appears to be one of the fundamental elements of children's overall advertising literacy that most researchers agree upon (Young, 1990; Rozendaal et al., 2009; Rozendaal et al., 2011; Zarouali, Poels, Walrave and Ponnet, 2019). As such, the cognitive dimensions of advertising literacy, evidenced by the ability to identify both the selling and persuasive intent of commercial material (Young, 1990; Zarouali et al., 2020) are incorporated into the initial conceptual framework that underpins this research (shown in Figure 2.5).

Many conceptualisations of children's advertising literacy are based upon research into traditional communication formats such as television advertising (Robertson and Rossiter, 1974; Zarouali et al., 2020), reflecting the media environment of the time when many of the studies were conducted (Buijzen et al., 2010). It is important to note that the persuasive intent and sales approach is typically explicit in traditional advertising formats. It requires more 'thinking' time and therefore increases the likelihood of rationalisation, which may result in consumers talking themselves out of a purchase decision (An, Jin and Park, 2014). Hence, there also seems to be consensus amongst advertising literacy researchers in terms of the reliance upon the rational processing of information.

However, as discussed in Section 1.2.4, there has been a dramatic and dynamic evolution of advertising techniques over the last 30 years (Hackley and Hackley, 2022), resulting from the rapid innovations in technology (Lampert, Schulze and Dreyer, 2021). This point is returned to later on in this Chapter (Section 2.3), but it is also relevant from a theoretical perspective. For instance, traditional advertising techniques such as television advertising are passive activities (Jenvey, 2007), whereas, contemporary advertising tactics, such as advergames are more immersive and require more interaction and attention (Panic et al., 2013; Rozendaal, Slot, van Reijmersdal and Buijzen, 2013; Ahn, 2022).

Thus, as time and technology have moved on, scholars have also identified other elements of advertising literacy besides its cognitive dimension, which consists of the ability to recognise selling and persuasive intent. This has led to the proposition of advertising literacy as a multidimensional concept. For example, Rozendaal, Lapierre, van Reijmersdal and Buijzen (2011) introduce a three-dimensional conceptualisation of advertising literacy.

The first dimension, referred to as ‘conceptual advertising literacy’ encompasses an understanding of both the selling and the persuasive intent of advertising in line with earlier research (Zarouali et al., 2020), but also includes five other elements namely;

- a) the recognition of advertising as a genre
- b) the recognition of an advertiser as the source of a message
- c) an understanding that the audience is a target
- d) an appreciation of the persuasive tactics used by advertisers
- e) an understanding of the potential for bias in advertising

Upon closer inspection, Rozendaal et al.’s (2011) conceptualisation appears to mimic the findings of a much older study where Rossiter and Robertson (1974, p138) identified four “sub capabilities” which include:

- a) recognition of the source or creator of the advertisement
- b) an understanding of the symbolic nature of the commercial content
- c) an appreciation of the difference between the advertised product experience
- d) actual personal experience of the product

It is important to note that when developing their ideas, Robertson and Rossiter (1974) only examined a specific form of television advertising that was familiar to the children who participated in the study at the time. Therefore, the extent to which these ‘sub capabilities’ can be applied to advertising research in the contemporary environment almost five decades later is not immediately obvious. However, there are clear similarities between the definition of ‘conceptual advertising literacy’ proposed by Rozendaal et al., (2011) and the “sub-capabilities” identified by Rossiter and Robertson (1974, p138). Both studies share the assumption that conceptual advertising literacy develops from very simple to more complex and abstract types of knowledge. The congruence between findings from two studies published 37 years apart, supports the argument in favour of revisiting historical work in

contemporary advertising literacy research as noted previously by Lawlor and Prothero, (2002).

Rozendaal et al., (2011) also argue that existing definitions of advertising literacy that focus solely on the possession of conceptual knowledge of advertising fail to consider the importance of attitudinal responses to advertising and how advertising-related knowledge is applied during the processing of a commercial message. Therefore, they also suggest the inclusion of two additional dimensions: a) *attitudinal advertising literacy* and b) *advertising literacy performance* (Rozendaal et al., 2011).

The first additional dimension; *Attitudinal advertising literacy*, takes into account how children's critical attitudes towards an advertisement can reduce their susceptibility to the unwanted effects of advertising, especially in conditions of low elaboration such as when they are exposed to embedded formats in the online environment (Rozendaal et al., 2011). This dimension incorporates two underlying elements that are important in developing critical attitudes towards advertising; scepticism and disliking of advertising (Rozendaal et al., 2009; Rozendaal et al., 2010; Rozendaal et al., 2011).

The second addition; *Advertising literacy performance* attempts to explain the actual application of advertising knowledge when confronted with advertising, including embedded formats. It incorporates two underlying skills; 1) the ability to retrieve relevant advertising related knowledge from memory while processing an advertising message and 2) the ability to apply relevant advertising-related knowledge during the processing of a commercial message (Rozendaal et al., 2011).

One of the strengths of the conceptualisation put forward by Rozendaal et al., (2011) is that it amalgamates previous work (Rozendaal, Buijzen and Valkenburg 2009; Rozendaal, Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2010) and seeks to clarify if, and how this conceptual knowledge is actually applied by children in practice. Hence, there is a question regarding the extent to which existing definitions of advertising literacy are still applicable to all contemporary advertising formats or whether they ought to be further expanded, specifically in terms of attitudinal and performative aspects (Rozendaal et al., 2011; Hudders et al., 2017; Zarouali et al., 2018).

This PhD research shares the view that in order to advance knowledge in this area, it is important to explore the actual *application* of advertising literacy in practice. That is to try and understand the ‘critical responses’ which are enacted as a result of exposure to advertising, rather than just measuring the possession of advertising knowledge in terms of recall of recognition. This is one of the key arguments of this PhD research, which is why it is reiterated throughout every Chapter of this thesis; in Methodology (Section 3.3.3), Findings (Section 4.2.5), Discussion (Section 5.3.1) and Conclusions (Section 6.8).

2.2.2.5 2016 - The Advertising Literacy Scale for Children (ALS-c)

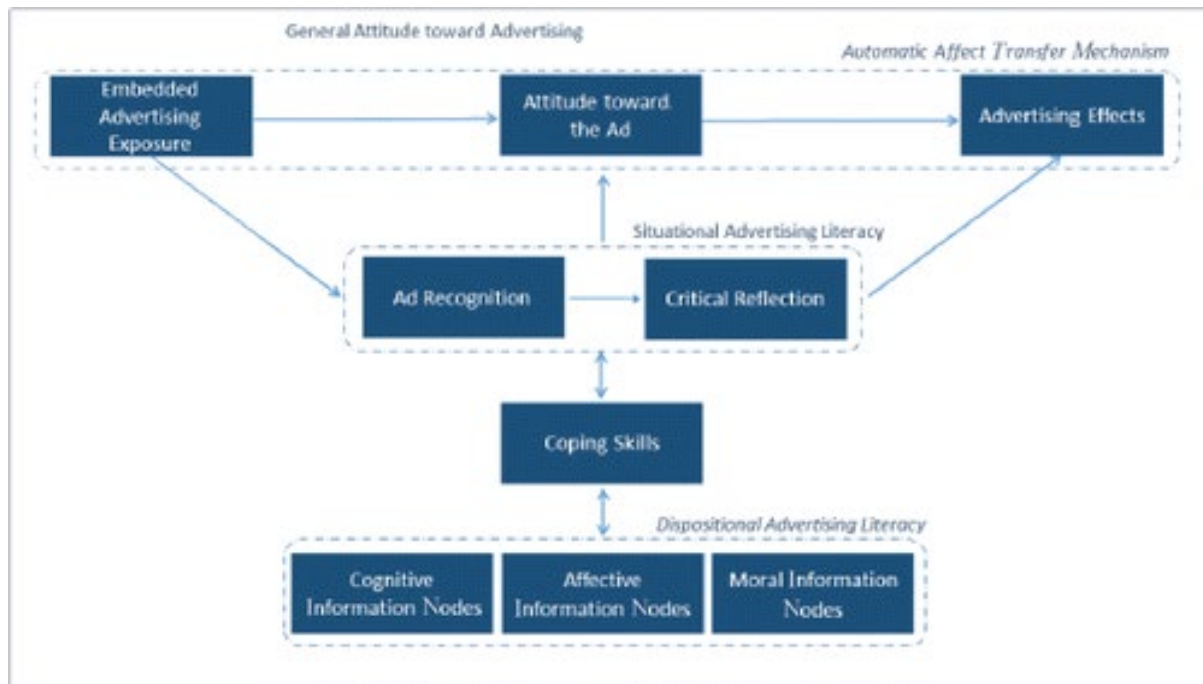
Nevertheless, the accurate measurement of advertising literacy remains a focus of recent research. For example, Rozendaal, Oprea and Buijzen (2016) developed the Advertising Literacy Scale for children (ALS-c) to address the lack of a uniform definition of advertising literacy and provide a reliable instrument for the measurement of advertising literacy as a construct in future research. The scale itself is rather complex, comprising 39 items to incorporate the two dimensions of advertising literacy introduced by Rozendaal et al., (2011) (i.e. conceptual knowledge of advertising and attitudinal responses to advertising). The scale is considered to be most suitable for research with children between the ages of 8 and 12 years of age because of the assumed maturation of their socio-cognitive competencies from during this period (Rozendaal, Oprea and Buijzen, 2016). One particular strength of this scale is that it is a reflection of the authors’ attempts to improve upon their own previous work. However, the ALS-c is based upon research into children’s responses to television advertisements, as opposed to more contemporary formats.

Overall, there are more studies on the cognitive dimensions of advertising literacy i.e. the possession of conceptual persuasion knowledge than its affective and behavioural dimensions (Rozendaal et al., 2011; Kunkel and Castonguay, 2012; Nelson, 2019). Where research has also considered the affective and behavioural dimensions, it is often based upon the idea that the possession of conceptual knowledge of advertising (i.e. at the cognitive level), acts as a key trigger of scepticism (i.e. at the affective/attitudinal level), which often leads to the rejection of advertising attempts (i.e. at a behavioural level) (Nelson and Ham, 2012).

2.2.2.6 2017 – Dispositional and Situational Advertising Literacy

More recently, Hudders et al., (2017) introduced a new conceptual framework for advertising literacy, shown below in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1. Conceptual Framework of Dispositional and Situational Advertising Literacy



(Source: Hudders et al., 2017, p335).

This framework builds upon the notion of advertising literacy as a multidimensional concept and incorporates two new constructs; Dispositional and Situational advertising literacy, which are examined in more detail in the following Sections (2.2.2.6.1 & 2.2.2.6.2).

2.2.2.6.1 Dispositional Advertising Literacy

Dispositional advertising literacy refers to all the associations people make regarding advertising and consists of three components; cognitive, moral and affective information nodes related to advertising (Hudders et al., 2017). In line with previous research, the cognitive component consists of the capacity to recognise advertising from other forms of communication, an understanding of its selling and persuasive intent and an awareness of different tactics and strategies (Wright et al., 2005).

The moral component is defined in terms of the “ability to develop thoughts about the moral appropriateness of specific advertising formats” (Hudders et al., 2017, p337). It includes the ability to recognise advertising’s tendency to distort reality, embellish benefits or overstate claims. Hudders et al., (2017) are right to acknowledge that this is not a ‘new’ idea, in the sense that moral judgements can be traced back to Friestad and Wright’s (1994) research, which was one of the first studies to emphasise the links between an individual’s personal beliefs about the morality of advertising and their ability to cope with commercial persuasion attempts. Nevertheless, the moral component may be more relevant than ever in advertising literacy research, due to an increase in the use of potentially harmful, deceptive and misleading advertising techniques (Hudders et al., 2017). The third component relates to the affective, or attitudinal dimensions of advertising literacy introduced in previous research defined in terms of two negative attitudes ‘scepticism’ and ‘disliking of advertising’ (Rozendaal et al., 2011; Rozendaal et al., 2016).

Dispositional advertising literacy refers to the possession of advertising knowledge and can manifest in several forms, including knowledge of persuasive intent, scepticism towards advertisements and resistance to manipulation (Hudders et al., 2017; Zarouali et al., 2019; Sweeney, Lawlor and Brady, 2021). The framework shown in Figure 2.1 illustrates Dispositional advertising literacy as comprising a network of associations that enables children to recognise a persuasive attempt and critically reflect upon it (Hudders et al., 2017), but it appears that critical reflections can only occur only in situations where children are fully cognisant of the fact that they are being exposed to advertising. Dispositional advertising literacy needs to be activated in order to trigger a separate process of critical reflection, referred to as Situational advertising literacy (Hudders et al., 2017).

2.2.2.6.2 Situational Advertising Literacy

Situational advertising literacy encompasses (1) “the recognition of a persuasive attempt and (2) “the critical reflection on this attempt” (Hudders et al., 2017, p337).

This reflects the crucial connection between Dispositional and Situational advertising literacy, where recognition is a necessary prerequisite for critical reflection. However, the quality of this critical reflection ultimately depends on how well developed an individual’s Dispositional advertising literacy is (De Jans et al., 2018). In other words, their ability “to recognize, analyse, interpret, evaluate, and remember persuasion attempts and to select and execute coping tactics believed to be effective and appropriate” (Friestad and Wright 1994,

p3). This appears to be based on the understanding that conceptual knowledge of advertising plays a crucial role in enabling young people to recognise and respond to advertisements in a critical way (Boush, Friestad, and Rose, 1994; Castonguay and Messina, 2022b).

Nevertheless, there is some evidence that increased exposure to commercially motivated content as a result of today's digital lifestyles might aid in the development of Dispositional advertising literacy (De Jans et al., 2018). As children become more familiar with contemporary advertising tactics, their responses should become more automatic and sophisticated and require less cognitive effort (Sweeney et al., 2021).

Situational advertising literacy refers to all the knowledge, skills and abilities that children possess regarding persuasion in an advertising context (Hudders et al., 2017). It is more dynamic than Dispositional advertising literacy in the sense that it reflects a subjective response to the immediate context in which an advertisement is seen. Hence, Situational advertising literacy may manifest in several forms. One manifestation could be an automatic analysis of the advertising format, such as a sponsored YouTube video uploaded by a well-known social media influencer. Recognition of the video as a form of advertising might trigger an automatic assessment that any endorsements made by the influencer are likely to be commercially-biased (van Reijmersdal and Rozendaal, 2020).

On a similar note, Situational advertising literacy may also manifest as a form of adaptive scepticism (Sweeney, Lawlor and Brady, 2021). This means that when confronted with advertising, sceptical attitudes may fluctuate in the moment (Hudders et al., 2017). It helps to explain why advertisements are evaluated in different ways, which might relate to certain advertising characteristics. For example, Loose et al., (2023) found that the claims made in advertisements for health products receive more sceptical responses from consumers than relating to fashion products suggesting that the type of product can influence the strength of consumers sceptical attitudes towards advertisements (Loose et al., 2023). At present there are very few studies that investigate how different advertising characteristics influence Situational advertising literacy in relation to the way advertisements are interpreted.

2.2.2.7 Moral Dimensions of Advertising Literacy

Next to recognising and understanding advertising, recent research has also started to acknowledge an evaluative component of advertising literacy (Loose et al., 2023). This

encompasses both the formation of an attitude to the advertising message (Rozenaal et al., 2011) and a critical reflection regarding the morality of advertising in terms of fairness and appropriateness of the advertising tactic used (Hudders et al., 2017). Generally speaking, research studies on the moral aspects of children's advertising literacy are sparse (Sweeney, Lawlor and Brady, 2021). According to the limited literature, morality as a dimension of advertising literacy refers to the ability to evaluate the fairness and appropriateness of advertising and the knowledge needed to do this (Friestad and Wright, 1994; Nelson 2008).

Morality has also been conceptualised as a judgement of 'right' or 'wrong' (Adams, Schellens and Valke, 2017; Castonguay and Messina, 2022a) and as the ability to assess the 'appropriateness' of persuasive communication (Zarouali et al., 2019; Sweeney, Lawlor and Brady, 2021). Thus, appropriateness is understood in terms of the perceived fairness of advertising (De Jans, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2018) and the potential risk of harm caused by exposure to an advertisement (Adams et al., 2017). If an advertisement is considered fair, children are more likely to tolerate the presence of the advertisement and may be more accepting of its message (De Pauw et al., 2017). According to Castonguay and Messina (2022a), appropriateness can also be considered on both a personal level (i.e. the negative effects of advertising on the individual) and at a societal level (i.e. the negative effects of advertising on wider society).

Prior research has found that children are somewhat indifferent to the presence of embedded tactics (De Pauw, De Wold, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2018) accepting them as part and parcel of the contemporary advertising landscape. This suggests that moral evaluations of advertising are less likely to occur in situations where children are exposed to embedded advertising tactics, such as those that permeate the online environment (Buijzen et al., 2010; Lawlor et al., 2016; Sweeney, Lawlor and Brady, 2021). Furthermore, whilst there is evidence that children can make morally sound judgements based on what is socially acceptable in everyday social situations, this does not necessarily extend to advertising (Loose et al., 2023). Children are capable of making a judgement as to whether an advertisement is "good or bad" but this relates to their attitudes towards advertising in general rather than an evaluation of the appropriateness and fairness of advertising tactics (Loose et al., 2023, p86). Studies have been somewhat inconclusive regarding the impact of children's moral evaluations of advertising on their subsequent consumer behaviour (Hudders et al., 2017; De Jans et al., 2020). Perhaps this is because most contemporary advertising

appeals to its audience at the affective level (Nairn and Fine, 2008; De Jans, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2018; Van Reijmersdal and Rozendaal, 2020), which means that children are likely to process advertising primarily under conditions of low elaboration (Buijzen et al., 2010). Therefore, they are unlikely to use their conceptual knowledge of advertising to critically evaluate the advertisements to which they are exposed (Rozendaal, Oprea and Buijzen, 2016; De Jans et al., 2020).

In order to understand how advertising works at the affective level it may be beneficial for researchers to also examine children's emotional reactions to advertising (Rozendaal et al., 2011). This thesis posits that one way to do this is to explore the characteristics of contemporary advertising in more depth, such as those relating to content, message, source and the product or service promoted by the advertisement (Rozendaal, 2011; van Reijmersdal and Rozendaal, 2020). This should also include the ways that contemporary advertising is disclosed as well as the different traits of the audience (Castonguay and Messina, 2022b; Loose, Hudders, De Jans and Vanwesenbeeck, 2023). For example, children may assume that disclosure cues are only present when advertising that has been pre-judged as appropriate or suitable for its intended audience. Perhaps moral advertising literacy enables individuals to question whether the use of media characters in sponsored influencer videos is ethically acceptable to target young audiences (De Jans, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018; van Dam and van Reijmersdal 2019). On the other hand, if an advertisement is judged as unfair, insofar as it is considered to be manipulative or morally inappropriate, evidence suggests that this is more likely to evoke a negative reaction from children (Hudders et al., 2017). This may manifest as a scepticism towards the advertisement's claims or contribute to a dislike of advertising in general.

Whilst studies have examined the affective or attitudinal dimensions of advertising literacy, it is important to recognise that this research just focuses on two negative attitudes; 'scepticism' and 'disliking of advertising' when defining what constitutes a critical attitude towards advertising. This appears to be the result of studies that have incorporated the widely-held perspective that critical evaluations of advertising equate to an appreciation of the negative aspects of advertising as a practice. According to the existing, albeit limited literature, advertising literacy researchers should not ignore the evidence which supports the argument that children's attitudes towards advertising can also be positive in nature. For example, favourable attitudes towards advertising such as 'liking of advertising' can stem from a

children's implicit familiarity with the "norms and values of advertising formats" (Hudders et al., 2017, p340). Positive attitudes may also be influential in persuading children to take a desired action after viewing an advertisement, regardless of its subject matter (Hudders et al., 2017). Hence, existing conceptualisations of advertising literacy that incorporate 'dislike of advertising' as a general attitude towards advertising may not be sufficient in explaining how children interpret an advertisement and if and why they might be dissuaded or put off from taking further action after viewing an advertisement.

At the time of writing, few studies have offered a comprehensive explanation as to the types of advertisements that children are more likely to like than dislike, and why this might be the case. Hence, it is still unclear what underlies children's evaluation of advertising and whether their evaluation differs depending on the format or tactics used (Ahn, 2022). It is plausible to suggest that positive attitudes may also be created and even enhanced by the different characteristics of advertisements. There is also evidence to suggest that the presence of disclosure cues can make favourable moral evaluations more likely (Boerman and van Reijmersdal, 2020). Advertising literacy researchers should not ignore the growing evidence that advertising in the contemporary media environment is both immersive and entertaining, making it much harder to discern than traditional advertising (Castonguay and Messina, 2022b). Nevertheless, there is some promising evidence that children have the ability to scrutinise contemporary advertising formats and their tactics (De Pauw, De Wolf, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2018). As such, this thesis argues that there is value in exploring children's perceptions of the content within which commercial agendas are embedded by examining content characteristics in more depth. In doing so, this could help researchers identify certain characteristics by which advertisements may be evaluated morally and affectively. This could have important implications for future research.

Indeed, one of the strengths of the conceptual model proposed by Hudders et al., (2017) is that it considers the actual retrieval of conceptual knowledge in the context within which persuasion takes place (i.e. Embedded advertising exposure) and the application of such knowledge in situ (Sweeney, Lawlor and Brady, 2021). As shown in Figure 2.1, the model also takes into account 'Attitude towards the ad' and 'Advertising Effects' to counterbalance the automatic affective reactions evoked by the fun and entertaining character of contemporary advertising formats (Hudders et al., 2017). As noted by Hudders et al., (2017)

it is also possible to explain some of the commercial success of contemporary advertising in terms of automatic affect-transfer mechanisms.

2.2.2.8 Affect Transfer Theory

The Affect-Transfer hypothesis suggests that consumers' perceptions of an advertisement can influence their attitude towards an advertisement, which in turn can influence their attitude towards a brand (Mitchell and Olson, 2000). MacKenzie et al. (1986) and MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) suggest that consumers' favourable attitudes towards a brand are influenced by their attitude to the advertisement itself rather than their perceptions of the brand.

A recent study by Stewart, Kammer-Kerwick, Kho and Cunningham (2018) supports the idea that consumer's attitudes towards an advertising can influence their attitudes towards the brand or product featured within social media content. In this way, popular content can mean that advertisements embedded within are viewed in the same positive light. Commercialised content that is well received by consumers is thought to be more successful at generating favourable brand attitudes and therefore more likely to increase consumers' purchase intentions (Mitchell and Olson, 2000). This could explain why this 'organic' or user-created content is more successful than paid-for advertising.

However, a distinction must be made here between genuinely organic content (i.e. without an underlying commercial agenda), seemingly organic content (where the underlying commercial agenda is difficult to detect) and blatant 'paid for' content.

Previous research into the ways in which affect transfer mechanisms work within advertising has also indicated that the effect on consumers attitudes cannot be neatly assigned to either end of a linear spectrum between positive and negative (Stewart et al., 2018). Indeed, influence is a much more complex concept to define in practice, pointing towards the importance of understanding the way that advertising is 'read' by consumers, depending on their own unique motivations and abilities (Mackenzie et al., 1986; Mackenzie and Lutz, 1989).

2.2.3 2016 - The Online Brand Communications (OBC) Literacy Framework

Following this theme, Lawlor et al., (2016) present the Online Brand Communications (OBC) literacy framework, based on an Irish study, which explored the features of online brand communications (i.e. digital advertising formats) to "illustrate the nature and form that child-

targeted brand communications can take in the online environment” (Lawlor et al., 2016, p2030).

One of the strengths of the OBC literacy framework is that it takes into account multiple factors of children's interaction with brands in the today's digital society, such as their increased exposure to commercialised content online when compared with their exposure to traditional advertising formats, the shareability of online content and also the potential for consumers to become messengers through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM).

This PhD research adopts the definition of eWOM proposed by Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler (2004, p39), which describes the phenomenon as:

“Any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet”.

Interestingly, Lawlor et al., (2016) found that teenage girls associate themselves with particular brands on social networking sites (SNS) as a way of portraying an “ideal image” online. This study also describes how this preoccupation with presenting a socially-acceptable image to peers could actually “be construed as unknowingly acting as brand ambassadors” (Lawlor et al., 2016, p2029). In other words, by sharing branded content on SNS as a form of self-expression, teenage girls may be unwittingly promoting certain brands to their friends. On the one hand, it is important to recognise that this study only focused on the experiences of teenage girls. On the other hand, other research has confirmed the significance and influence of eWOM. For example, Rosario, Sotgui, Valck and Bijmolt, (2016, p297) assert that eWOM “represents one of the most significant developments in contemporary consumer behaviour”. Furthermore, previous research has also observed that the “burgeoning peer-to-peer cultural industry” is a growing area of interest in childhood research (Marsh, 2015, p4) and an area worthy of further exploration within marketing research (Coates, Hardman, Halford, Christiansen and Boyland, 2019). Despite this, marketing research has largely ignored children's experiences of eWOM to date (Bao, Chang, Kim and Moon, 2019). This is a type of ‘earned’ media, which is considered to be much more effective at engaging potential customers than paid-for advertisements such as pop-ups and banners, which many teenagers find irritating (Lawlor et al., 2016).

Lawlor et al., (2016) propose five components of Online Brand Communications (OBC) literacy, which are outlined in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2 OBC Literacy Framework

Brand owner invests in (type of marketing activity)	Corresponding components of a child’s brand-related literacy
Paid media/content	Recognition of the range and nature of online platforms available to the brand owner
	Appreciation of the brand owner’s objectives, ranging from consumer-brand engagement to sales objectives
Owned media/content	Understanding that brand-related content can originate from other consumers, as well as from the brand owner
Earned media/content	Understanding that word-of-mouth relating to a brand can be encouraged and incentivised by brand owner
	Understanding that brand-related content can be presented by the brand owner, and appropriated by third parties, such as consumers, for personal, social and commercial reasons

(Source: Lawlor et al., 2016, p2031).

2.2.4 2018 - The Persuasion Knowledge Scale for Sponsored Content (PKS-SC)

More recent research has also attempted to provide a reliable scale for measurement of advertising understanding that is more appropriate for the nature of the contemporary media environment. For example, the Persuasion Knowledge Scale for Sponsored Content (PKS-SC) (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal and Dima 2018, p671) was developed to measure nine underlying components of persuasion knowledge specifically relating to commercially-motivated online content. These components include; (1) recognition of sponsored content, (2) understanding of selling and persuasive intent, (3) recognition of the commercial source of sponsored content, (4) understanding of persuasive tactics, (5) understanding of the economic model, (6) self-reflective awareness of the effectiveness of sponsored content, (7) scepticism toward sponsored content, (8) appropriateness of sponsored content, and (9) liking of sponsored content.

2.2.5 The Function of Advertising Literacy

Definitions of advertising literacy have historically focused purely on cognitive aspects of advertising understanding (Rozendaal et al., 2011; Kunkel and Castonguay, 2012; Nelson, 2019). The literature generally supports the idea that conceptual knowledge of advertising plays a crucial role in enabling children to recognise and respond to advertisements in a critical way (Castonguay and Messina, 2022a). However, it is worth highlighting that almost 40 years prior to these studies, Robertson and Rossiter (1974) emphasised the importance of symbolism within advertisements and how having actual lived experience of a product can influence the way an advertisement is interpreted, suggesting that there could be more to children's advertising literacy beyond the cognitive dimension. Hence, there remains a need for researchers "to more fully explore what advertising means to children" (Lawlor and Prothero, 2002, p495). Indeed, in addition to agreeing upon how the concept of advertising literacy should be defined, it is important to consider the function of advertising literacy, in order to understand how this knowledge is applied in practice and what should constitute a 'critical response' to advertising (Hudders et al., 2017; De Pauw et al., 2018).

2.2.5.1 Advertising Literacy as a Cognitive Defence Against Unwanted Effects

It is interesting to note that the majority of studies on children's advertising literacy, regardless of the age range of the participants or the type of advertising investigated, share this common assumption regarding the core function of advertising literacy, which is that it provides a defence against unwanted advertising effects (An, Jin and Park, 2014; Isaac and Grayson, 2017). Thus, over time, both advertising literacy (Young, 1990) and persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright, 1994) have evolved from ways to explain how consumers simply cope with advertising, into a complex process of "consciously and critically processing" advertising (Rozendaal, Valkenburg and Buijzen 2009, p329).

The various extensions to the original concept of advertising literacy discussed so far in this Chapter (Rozendaal et al., 2011a; Rozendaal et al., 2011b; Rozendaal et al., 2016; De Pauw et al., 2017; Hudders et al., 2017; Boerman et al., 2018) clearly reflect a desire for clarity amongst scholars and an appreciation of the importance of understanding how advertising knowledge is actually applied by children in situ i.e. when they are exposed to an advertisement. However, these conceptualisations still operationalise the function of advertising literacy as a way of reducing susceptibility to advertising effects, based on the cognitive dimension (i.e. the possession of conceptual knowledge of advertising). Where

research has been conducted with children, there are suggestions that this knowledge can serve as “a filter or radar,” (Hudders et al., 2017, p334) which increases scepticism towards advertising’s claims and reduces susceptibility to advertising’s effects (Isaac and Grayson, 2017). It is not clear exactly how this idea originated, but one possible explanation could stem from suggestions that children’s decoding skills enable them to ‘resist’ advertising messages (Nava and Nava, 1990; Kunkel et al., 2004) which perhaps set a precedent for future research (Livingstone and Helpser, 2006; Lapierre, 2019).

Given the widespread concerns regarding the negative effects of advertising on children discussed earlier, it is understandable that a significant amount of research continues to focus on better understanding children’s advertising literacy in order to improve its efficacy as a cognitive defence against unwanted advertising effects (Rozendaal, Lapierre and Buijzen, 2011; Isaac and Grayson, 2017). Yet the “cognitive defense view” is problematic for a number of reasons (Rozendaal, Buijzen and Valkenburg 2009, p288). For instance, despite having become ‘received wisdom’ in the field, there is actually very little evidence that supports the assumption that having conceptual knowledge of advertising actually reduces a person’s susceptibility to advertising effects (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Lapierre, 2019). One possible reason for this could be the lack of consensus in conceptualisations of advertising literacy as noted earlier, meaning that defence itself has not been clearly defined in the literature, other than in terms of a reduction in purchase intention (Vanwesenbeeck, Walrave and Ponnet, 2016) or decreased product requests (Lapierre, 2019) as a result of understanding what advertising is and how it works.

In reality, it does not make sense to say that simply having conceptual knowledge about advertising will render a persuasive attempt ineffective (Livingstone and Helpser, 2006; Lapierre, 2019). Crucially, in the original PKM, Friestad and Wright (1994, p3) state that: “we do not assume that people invariably or even typically use their persuasion knowledge to resist a persuasion attempt”. In practice, consumers can cope with persuasive attempts by trusting the marketer and believing the message (Friestad and Wright, 1994), particularly where credible persuasive tactics are used (Isaac and Grayson, 2017). However, the notion of consumers’ having trust in advertisers and companies is something that is rarely examined in research as are the persuasive tactics themselves (Hudders et al., 2017).

Second, evidence has repeatedly supported the idea that “merely having the concepts in some form does little, if anything to prevent children from being led astray by advertising” (Moses and Baldwin, 2005, p197). Again, the use of the phrase “led astray” here is indicative of the view that advertising is a negative influence in children’s lives. What Moses and Baldwin (2005) mean is that advertising can still be very persuasive even when a child understands what an advertisement is and how it works in practice. Indeed, Rozendaal et al., (2009, p291) state that a common-sense perspective would imply;

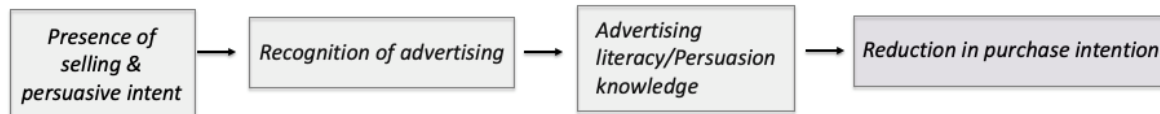
“that adults, who presumably are able to recognize advertising and understand its intent, are resistant to persuasive advertising messages. However, most adults will readily admit that they can be seduced by advertising, even when they are aware of the nature and intent of the persuasive message”.

Disagreement surrounding the age at which children can recognise and cope with advertising attempts based on inconclusive evidence raises questions over the effectiveness of current advertising restrictions and regulations, which to a large extent are based upon age and little else. Perhaps the issue is not so much that children have lower levels of understanding in general, which is widely accepted and understood by childhood researchers from across disciplines. Perhaps the focus of advertising regulation should focus more on the risks of harm in terms of children’s exposure to contemporary commercial content. This is an idea that is returned to in the final Chapter of this thesis (Chapter 6) which discusses the benefits of new insights and how these can help to strengthen decisions made on advertising policy within the UK.

Third, the results from studies that have tried to investigate the effectiveness of specific advertising literacy interventions designed to improve children’s defences against advertising effects report mixed success (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Sekarasih, Scharer, Olson, Onut and Lanthorn, 2018).

Despite this, the literature maintains that critical responses to advertising manifest in the form of scepticism, that when activated by recognition, reduce one’s susceptibility to unwanted advertising effects (Sweeney, Lawlor and Brady, 2021) as illustrated in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2 Advertising Literacy as a Defence Against Unwanted Advertising Effects



(Source: Author's own work)

Finally, many studies neglect to consider the suggestion that there can be positive implications from advertising exposure. Yet, as outlined earlier, there is a much smaller body of evidence that supports the positive implications of advertising exposure in children (Lapierre, 2017). In an environment dominated by concerns around the intensity of child-targeted marketing, it is somewhat understandable that only a handful of recent studies have begun to challenge the assumption that commercially-motivated persuasion is always something that ought to be defended against. Despite this, a growing body of evidence suggests that in some contexts, advertising can actually have positive effects on people, including children (Lawlor and Prothero, 2008; Oprea, Buijzen and van Reijmersdal, 2016; Lapierre et al., 2017). The current evidence base for the positive effects of advertising exposure is scant, yet some suggest that it has the potential to encourage positive behaviours in young people (Lapierre, 2017) and there are indications that this exposure can actually increase the sense of ownership that children feel over their own environment (Oprea et al., 2016). Additionally, there is also evidence from other areas of marketing, such as not-for-profit, cause-related and social marketing that suggests that traditional advertising strategies can actually be applied in worthwhile projects and campaigns (Schuster, Kubacki and Rundle-Thiele, 2016) and can be highly successful at engaging children (David and Rundle-Thiele, 2019).

For example, the concept of reverse eco-socialisation is gaining traction (Singh, Sahadev, Oates, and Alevizou, 2020) that is, how children can persuade their parents and caregivers to adopt more environmentally-friendly behaviours (Uzell, 1999) such as reducing plastic waste. Whilst this is promising, most of the evidence of impact takes a long time to gather (Lee and Kotler, 2016) and tends to come from practitioners and those working in the marketing industry (Merritt, Truss and Hopwood, 2011). For example, marketing research consultancies have indicated young consumers are increasingly drawn to brands that share their cultural and ideological values (Mintel, 2019) and are aligning themselves with

globally-important causes and social movements that they care about and are important to the future of the planet, with agreement from media journalists who have suggested social media platforms such as TikTok are one of the first places many young people will go “to share social activism content” (Tidy and Smith Galer, 2019, n.p.). This means that on balance, there is a lack of scientifically grounded insights into the most effective ways to use marketing techniques to achieve positive societal change from academic research (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012; Lapierre et al., 2017). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind the other side of the debate when conducting research with children.

2.2.5.2 Advertising Literacy’s Role in Persuasion Processing

Other scholars have emphasised the importance of understanding how children actually process commercially-motivated persuasive attempts (Buijzen et al., 2010). For example, The Processing of Commercialised Media Content, hereafter referred to as the PCMC model (Buijzen et al., 2010) attempts to explain how contemporary advertising tactics can affect children in the absence of conscious recognition of a persuasive attempt (i.e. without the activation of advertising literacy or persuasion knowledge).

2.2.5.3 2010 - The Processing of Commercialised Media Content (PCMC) Model

The PCMC model is a triple-level framework incorporating three levels of persuasion processing; systematic, heuristic and automatic. The PCMC model draws on the psychological theories of resource allocation (RA) and resource required (RR) to theorise how differences in persuasive tactics can render one type of persuasion processing more likely than another. This model asserts that it is important to establish the level of integration between a persuasive message and its context in research (Buijzen et al., 2010).

According to this model, distinctions can be made between three separate types of content integration; format, thematic and narrative. To summarise these types, format integration refers to commercial content that is specifically designed to resemble the editorial content that surrounds it, (Buijzen et al., 2010). Thematic integration refers to the thematic ‘fit’ of persuasive content with the context in which it appears (Buijzen et al., 2010) for example a sponsored website (Wise, Bolls, Kim, Venkataraman and Meyer, 2008). At the next level, there is narrative integration, which refers to the “semantic or conceptual relevance of a persuasive message within the overall narrative of the surrounding media context” (Buijzen et al., 2010 p428). Examples of narrative integration include children’s television programs

and their associated brand extensions (Buijzen et al., 2010) and also advergames, where a video game is designed around a specific brand (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012). The concept of narrative integration is particularly relevant to this thesis because although not explicitly specified in the existing literature, newer forms of advertising such as sponsored YouTube videos and commercially-motivated TikTok videos, could also be considered examples of formats where the intent to persuade is disguised within the surrounding content.

Importantly, what the PCMC model attempts to do is circumvent the issue of researching rapidly changing media formats by focusing on the fundamentals of persuasion processing and acknowledging the importance of specific message characteristics and context (i.e. personal relevance, perceptual prominence, complexity, interactivity, content, style, and integration) (Buijzen et al., 2010, p443) an approach that is largely absent from the literature.

According to Buijzen et al., (2010, p443) the PCMC model can “serve as a starting point” for future research because it provides a higher-level theoretical framework. Based on this assertion, the PCMC model provides a useful theoretical grounding for exploring children’s awareness and perceptions of advertising in the contemporary media environment which is one of the objectives of this PhD thesis, reinforcing the potential importance of analysing children’s advertising content in more detail.

2.2.5.4 Elaboration Likelihood Model

Elsewhere, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty and Cacioppo, 1981; Cacioppo and Petty, 1989) has been applied in advertising research but much less so in studies concerning children. Essentially, the Elaboration Likelihood Model posits that “the elaboration process of advertising... takes two separate routes depending on the level of involvement [with the advert]” (Te’eni-Harari, Lampert and Lehman-Wilzig, 2007 p326). To summarise, higher involvement leads to a central processing route usually via a strong or convincing message. Lower involvement results in advertisements being processed through peripheral cues or a peripheral route, via visual elements such as the ‘attractiveness’ of a character used within the advertisement (Cacioppo and Petty, 1989; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981; Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann, 1983).

If a person’s motivation and ability to think about a particular persuasive message are high, then the ELM suggests that this will be processed via a ‘central’ route. On the other hand, if both motivation and ability are low, then a person is more likely to process the advertisement

through a peripheral route (Cacioppo, Petty and Stoltenberg, 1985). This model accounts for source credibility mainly as a peripheral cue; however, it assumes that message quality is directed at an individual's rational judgement rather than his/her attitudinal or emotional evaluation of the message or the source of that message (Bhattacharjee and Sanford, 2006; Wood, 2012). According to the ELM (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), message perceptions refer to an individual's subjective perception of the arguments in the message. In other words, different consumers may perceive the same advertisement differently based on their own subjective perceptions. Furthermore, although the two types of information processing are thought to influence people's attitudes in different ways, they may occur simultaneously (Chen and Chaiken 1999).

Whilst traditionally considered to be a 'model of persuasion processing, researchers have attempted to examine if the ELM holds true for children too. For example, Te'eni-Harari et al., (2007) applied the ELM to children to assess whether they process advertising differently to adults. This study mixed questionnaires with focus groups to collect data on 330 participants in three separate age groups; 4-7, 8-11 and 12-15 years. The authors were interested in manipulating the level of involvement with an advertisement, which was achieved by offering some participants a gift (high involvement condition) and others no gift (low involvement condition).

In addition, the authors attempted to assess the effects of strong vs. weak messaging and attractive vs. unattractive characters within an advertisement. The authors predicted that young children (aged 4-7 years) would respond to peripheral cues in the form of characters within an advert, more so than central cues such as a strong persuasive message, compared to adults. This reasoning makes sense, however in this study only one peripheral cue was examined in any detail, that is the use of a character and the perceived attractiveness of that character (Te'eni-Harari et al., 2007). It could be that such a narrow focus may not have provided a true picture of the effectiveness of this process. Furthermore, the characters used were not dissimilar enough to produce any significant differences between conditions because as not only are mother and neighbour (as used in this study) too similar, there is also a chance that the older children (aged 12-15 years) who took part in this study, may not have valued their mother's opinion in the same way that a younger child (aged 4-7 years) might. This could explain why the authors found no difference in attitudes towards their advert stating that: "the attitude towards the brand was not significantly influenced by the

advertisement character” (Te’eni-Harari et al., 2007, p331). To accurately assess if and how this model applies to contemporary advertising, the conditions of consumption used in the study would need to accurately reflect the contemporary consumption environment. Rossiter (2001, p12) argues that the ELM is a theory “in theory form”, and as such needs to be converted into two separate “strategic principles”; one for ‘low involvement’ and one for ‘high involvement’ buying decisions, in order to be useful to marketing practitioners. Furthermore, what the ELM does not provide is a theoretical explanation of the processing of persuasion in situations where involvement may be high, elaboration may be low, but peripheral cues may also be strong (i.e. other cues aside from characters) for example the use of brand-associated collaborations within popular children’s games such as Roblox and Fortnite, where players have the option to purchase limited time only items for their characters, such as virtual Nike Air Max trainers in Roblox (Waters, 2020) and Marvel-themed ‘skins’ for their characters in Fortnite (Hernandez, 2019).

To stay relevant, research has had to evolve in order to keep pace with these social, technological and cultural shifts (Buijzen et al., 2010; Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2023). Academics are certainly aware of these changes, and many have attempted to keep pace with the advancements in advertising techniques. These techniques are examined in more depth in the following section of this Chapter (2.2) but to summarise here, this includes the commercial aspects of web pages, (Blades et al., 2012) brand placements on websites, (van Reijmersdal, Jansz, Peters and van Noort, 2010) the commercially-motivated nature of advergames (Panic et al., 2013; Verhellen, Oates, De Pelsmacker and Dens, 2014) and the hidden agenda of sponsored content on video sharing platforms (VSPs) (De Jans, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2018). Hence, there have been calls for further research into advertising formats that do not activate advertising literacy through the traditional route of recognition (Buijzen et al., 2010; Hoek et al., 2020) This is in response to the evolution of contemporary advertising techniques targeted at children as noted previously, where not only is the level of interaction higher but the underlying commercial intent is also disguised in some way rendering it much harder to recognise than it is within traditional advertising (Freeman and Shapiro, 2014; Confos and Davis, 2016; Hudders et al., 2017; De Jans et al., 2018). These advertising tactics rely on the success of implicit persuasion based on the principle that less effort is required to process persuasion attempts that occur in highly immersive situations (Confos and Davis, 2016; Hudders et al., 2017; De Jans et al., 2018; Hoek et al., 2020). Consumers pay less attention to advertising that is integrated into the surrounding

environment (Buijzen et al., 2010; Freeman and Shapiro, 2014; Lawlor et al., 2016; van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, Smink, van Noort and Buijzen, 2017). Hence, it is important to recognise that in these scenarios, children may be more likely to be persuaded without them necessarily realising it (Confos and Davis, 2016; van Reijmersdal and Rozendaal, 2020). Thus, conceptualisations of advertising literacy should also be updated to take into account the ways that the boundaries between advertising and entertainment are increasingly blurred and how commercially-motivated communications blend seamlessly into the surrounding content within online environments (Freeman and Shapiro, 2014; Sweeney, Lawlor and Brady, 2021).

2.2.5.5 Dual-Process Models of Persuasion Processing

According to Chaiken and Maheswaran (1994), dual-process models of persuasion stipulate that both heuristic and systematic cues must be present in a stimulus to trigger information processing in the receiver/viewer. The Heuristic Systematic Model (HSM) explains how people receive and process persuasive messages, defining information processing as an antecedent of attitude formation (Eagly and Chaiken 1993). It is an established yet underutilised model within communication research (Zheng, Huang, Qiu and Bai, 2023). HSM is primarily based on the psychological principle that people use limited cognitive resources or use an economically-minded approach to information processing when they are presented with persuasive information (Chen, Duckworth and Chaiken 1999). Based on this principle, consumers' purchase decisions are somewhat guided by the 'principle of least effort.' (Chen, Duckworth and Chaiken 1999).

Heuristic cues relate to the simple, non-content-based cues within content that is involved in the formation of attitudes, therefore little cognitive effort is required by the consumer (Eagly and Chaiken 1993). There are similarities here with the research on mere exposure effects (Zajonc, 1968; Grimes and Kitchen, 2007) in that a reliance on heuristic cues suggests that consumers might be receptive to a particular brand simply because of their existing beliefs pertaining to the reputation of the person endorsing it (Chen, Duckworth and Chaiken 1999). In contrast, systematic cues relate to the way that people make decisions based upon their evaluation of the available information. In this way, consumers' attitudes can be formed by evaluating the underlying logic or credibility of persuasive messages within the stimulus (Eagly and Chaiken 1993), but this requires more conscious effort.

In terms of advertising literacy, previous research has indicated that if children lack conceptual advertising knowledge and experience of the marketplace (John, 1999) then heuristic or systematic processing of persuasive messages is thought to be unlikely (Buijzen et al., 2010). However, recent research has suggested that the HSM model may actually have some value in helping to explain the success of more contemporary commercial persuasion formats, particularly the more embedded techniques such as influencer marketing. For example, a recent study by Zheng et al., (2023) found that there were clear links between consumer's interpretations of the products promoted by the influencers they followed on social media platforms and their consumer attitudes and behaviours. There were links between the consumers' level of interest in the product and the perceived personal relevance of the message, which in turn was shown to be a motivation for consumers to engage in systematic information processing (Zheng et al., 2023). Furthermore, there was also evidence that influencers' ability to portray authenticity, typically demonstrated through the sharing of personal information online (Zheng et al., 2023) could also serve as a heuristic cue to signify that the influencer was trustworthy, genuine and credible, personality traits that have been shown to be importance to consumers in the today's digital environment (Abidin and Ots, 2016; Audrezet et al., 2020). These insights suggest an area where more research would be useful, specifically on how perceptions of a social media influencer/digital content creators (source) may also influence children's attitudes towards brands and products when they are promoted in this way.

2.2.5.6 Automatic Persuasion Processing Theory

One of the fundamental differences between traditional and digital advertising tactics is the level of consumer interaction involved (Buijzen et al., 2010; Panic et al., 2013). Therefore, automatic persuasion processing theory may be useful in explaining how embedded persuasive tactics still succeed in persuading children online, even if children fail to recognise an advertisement or apply their advertising literacy in an attempt to resist unwanted effects (Auty and Lewis, 2004) for example, in cases where their attention is elsewhere, such as when watching a YouTube video (Xiao, Wang and Chan-Olmstead, 2018). This type of processing could also explain how the positive effect associated with watching a sponsored video could be transferred onto a featured brand without children realising it, in the same way it can happen with entertaining advergames (Buijzen et al., 2010). As before however, despite the underlying theoretical similarities between the concepts mentioned so far, with the exception of the PCMC model (Buijzen et al., 2010), few researchers have attempted to bring

them together into an integrated model for understanding advertising effects in conditions of low elaboration and attention (Grimes, 2008).

Furthermore, with the exception of the OBC Literacy Framework (Lawlor et al., 2016) the CALS-c (Rozenaal et al., 2016) and the PKS-Sc (Boerman et al., 2018) few studies have actually attempted to scrutinise the nature of advertising in the contemporary media environment (Hudders et al., 2017) which are outlined in more detail in the following section of this literature review (2.3)

2.3 Advertising to Children in the Contemporary Media Environment

Nineteen years ago, Moses and Baldwin (2005, p186) observed that “children’s exposure to advertising is extensive and ever increasing”. As noted in the introductory Chapter, from a historical perspective, it is somewhat fascinating to note that even before use of the Internet became mainstream in society, the ‘contemporary’ marketing practices *du jour* were considered to “subsume a fantastic panoply of merchandising and communication techniques” (Kline, 1993, p10). Fast forward thirty years and this observation can still be considered just as valid today as it was then. Arguably even more so, when one considers how the evolution in digital technology has expanded the range of communication tactics that are available to today’s marketing practitioners in ways that could never have been predicted (Kotler et al., 2017; Hackley and Hackley, 2022).

Importantly, this is a trend that has continued in the UK. Over the last two decades in particular, there has been relentless innovation in contemporary marketing tactics, which has dramatically altered the advertising landscape “creating an explosion of new, targeted options” beyond television and print (Schaeffer, 2012, p89). The outcome is an oversaturated marketing environment (Hackley and Hackley, 2022) which on the one hand means that it is increasingly difficult for brands to reach potential customers (Rohde and Mau, 2021). On the other hand, this oversaturation has contributed to the formation of a generation of consumers that are much more informed and demanding than previous generations (Schor, 2005; Vollero, Sardanelli and Siano, 2021). As a result, marketers are constantly seeking new ways to engage young consumers with persuasive messages about their brands, products or services (Freeman and Shapiro, 2014; Sweeney, Lawlor and Brady, 2021), particularly via social media platforms and in the online environment (Waqas, Hamzah and Salleh, 2022).

2.3.1 Conceptualising Advertising

Perhaps one of the reasons why there is a lack of consensus amongst advertising literacy researchers is that there is no definition of advertising that fully accounts for the evolution in advertising tactics facilitated by the digital revolution (Dahlen and Rosengren, 2016; Hackley and Hackley, 2022).

Historically, advertising has been defined in terms of a one-way, didactic form of communication between messenger and receiver, reflecting the ‘push’ format of traditional

communications channels such as print media, radio and television (Dahlen and Rosengren, 2016). However, it needs to be acknowledged that the technological advancements of the last 30 years have had a significant impact on the evolution of advertising and its tactics (Richards and Curran, 2002; Eisend, 2015; Hackley and Hackley, 2022) which are briefly summarised in Table 2.3 below.

Table 2.3 Comparison between Traditional and Contemporary Advertising

Traditional Advertising	Contemporary Advertising
Product-focused	Customer-focused
Transactional	Relationship orientated
Mass messaging	Targeted, personalised messaging
One-way communication	Cyclical communication
Effect through repetition	Effect through relevance
Narrow range of channels and tactics	Broad range of channels and tactics

(Source : Kliatchko, 2008; Dahlen et al., 2010; Kotler et al., 2017).

Despite all the ways in which the digital revolution and advancements in technology have fundamentally changed advertising practice over the last 30 years, this has not been reflected in advertising research. It is somewhat remarkable that the definition of what advertising is and how and why it works, has not actually been discussed to any significant extent over the last 20 years (Nan and Faber, 2004; Kerr and Schultz, 2010). The conceptualisations of advertising that are still being used by today’s researchers still closely resemble those from the 1920s (Dahlen and Rosengren, 2016).

Hence, there have been calls for new research that can assist in the development of a revised definition of advertising, which better reflects the dynamic nature of the contemporary media environment and the multitude of communications formats that now exist within it (Kerr and Schultz 2010; Carlson 2015; Faber 2015).

In response to these calls, Dahlen and Rosengren (2016, p334) introduce a working definition of advertising as “brand-initiated communication intent on impacting people”, which acknowledges three important dynamics of the contemporary media environment;

1. the constant addition of new advertising formats
2. shifts in consumer behaviour
3. the extended effects of advertising

Paradoxically, in trying to broaden the scope of advertising, this definition has become too narrow in the sense that the term ‘brand’ is somewhat ambiguous and does not acknowledge all the other forms of promotional communication that can be initiated by other sources, such as a large multinational corporation (e.g. Unilever which has multiple brands), a non-profit organisation, a social enterprise, a sole trader operating a small business or a social media influencer (e.g. a Youtuber, Instagram or TikTok influencer) or organic, user-created content, earned media and word of mouth recommendations. The definition proposed by Dahlen and Rosengren (2016) could, in theory, apply to all forms of advertising, yet it could also, in theory, apply to all forms of entertainment and information communications as well. This definition has oversimplified the core essence of what advertising is and how it works.

Prior to this, the last significant effort to update the definition of advertising was over 20 years ago, when Richards and Curran (2002, p74) suggested a definition of advertising as “paid, mediated communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in the future”. This definition is more detailed than the one proposed by Dahlen and Rosengren (2016). On closer inspection, this definition acknowledges the underlying commercial intent that distinguishes advertising from other forms of communication (“paid, mediated”), it also acknowledges the underlying persuasive and selling intent and recognises that all forms of advertising have an inherent call to action, which is not explicitly defined here (Richards and Curran, 2002) but most probably relates to the purchase of a product or service.

Whilst it is clear that there is a need for advertising definitions to evolve accordingly, there remains a somewhat semantic debate around what constitutes appropriate terminology in this context (Bergkvist and Langner, 2021). Scholars disagree about which terms are most appropriate for defining the purpose of advertising and whether it is designed to ‘impact, ‘affect’ or ‘persuade’ its target audience (Dahlen and Rosengren, 2016). There are also questions regarding the merits of using ‘paid’ versus ‘incentivised’ to describe the underlying commercial agenda of advertising (Dahlen and Rosengren, 2016). Furthermore, in light of the shift in consumer dynamics from passive to interactive roles over the last 30 years, the term

‘audience’ has been replaced by ‘receiver’ (Richards and Curran, 2002) and more recently ‘people’ (Dahlen and Rosengren, 2016).

However, redefining advertising is not a straightforward task, as noted by recent advances in advertising research that have also tried to address this issue. For instance, Hackley and Hackley (2022) propose that advertising should be defined as a form of paratextual communication. The term ‘paratext’ captures the “kinetic, fluid and relational character” of contemporary advertising (Hackley and Hackley, 2022 p5). Paratextual communication offers a useful perspective for contemporary advertising research. It is a concept that is grounded in theory yet can transcend media, format and context. For example, it acknowledges that all forms of media content that are connected to marketing and/or advertising - including branded clothing, YouTube videos, Amazon product reviews, the placement of an Apple MacBook in a movie scene, posters displayed in an underground station and the use of SpongeBob SquarePants on cheese packaging share one thing in common (Hackley and Hackley, 2022). They all represent a palpable shift in advertising practice, where techniques have evolved from “explicit sales pitches to implicit brand presence” (Hackley and Hackley, 2022, p85).

Paratextual communication recognises that online advertising is much more subtle than offline advertising. The underlying selling intent is still present, but the sales approach is more indirect that relies upon implicit advertising, which is used “as a device that renders normal and everyday associations that would seem incongruous were they made explicit” (Hackley and Hackley, 2022, p85). It also identifies some of the defining features of digital advertising formats that dominate social media and the online environment, including “Low attention, short form, high volume and high velocity advertising consumed across multiple platforms” (Hackley and Hackley, 2022, p22).

Advertising researchers are faced with the challenge of reaching a consensus on how advertising should be defined. This PhD research acknowledges the difficulties in defining advertising as it exists in the contemporary media environment. It is difficult to keep up with technological changes and evolution of sophisticated marketing techniques, therefore there is a strong case to support broadening the scope of advertising so that it includes other marketing communications too. Whilst it is important to work towards a conceptualisation of advertising that can transcend format and be applied in multiple advertising studies, it ought to be recognised that in doing so there is a risk that the important differences between

formats, style, execution and substance might be neglected. Therefore, definitions of advertising and advertising literacy that are tied to specific types of advertising may not be fit for purpose or able to adapt to changes in the advertising landscape.

Nevertheless, it is argued that in order to better understand advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment, it is necessary to adopt a broader definition of advertising to include a wider range of media channels, techniques and tactics that have traditionally been considered as separate elements of the marketing communications mix (Richards and Curran, 2002). This proposition is based on evidence that “consumers tend to regard virtually all commercial messages as ‘advertising’” (Malmelin, 2010, p132).

Therefore, this thesis introduces a conceptualisation of advertising as “All forms of commercially-motivated communication that intend to promote brands, products and services to a target audience”. By acknowledging “all forms” this conceptualisation broadens the scope of traditional advertising definitions. The inclusion of the phrase “commercially-motivated” also recognises that advertising is still defined primarily as a form of communication that has an underlying intent to sell and persuade. However, it acknowledges that there are exceptions to this, for instance, when advertising is used in social marketing campaigns, where the intent to sell is typically absent but there is still an underlying intent to persuade. For example, advertisements may be used to target specific groups to persuade them to change some aspect of their behaviour, such as increasing their rate of recycling. The use of the term “promote” is also considered to be a more appropriate way of conceptualising the purpose of communication, that it is grounded in theory but is also flexible in the sense that it can relate to both selling and/or persuasion.

2.3.2 Children as Consumers

According to the Office for National Statistics (hereafter referred to as ONS) during the period of 2015 to 2017, children in the UK aged 7 to 15 years spent an average of £12.40 of their own money per week. This equates to an average spend of £87,274,498 per week by this age group (a calculation based on 2018 population estimates as shown in Table 2.4). Some of the most common purchases made by children themselves include clothes and footwear; a market valued at £8.3 billion in the UK alone (Statista, 2020) as well as toys, games, electronic devices, make-up, toiletries, snacks and drinks (Williams, Ashill and Thirkell, 2016).

Table 2.4 Breakdown of Children aged 7-15 years in UK Population in 2018

Age	Number of children in UK	Percentage of total UK population in age band
7	836,008	1.3%
8	819,824	1.2%
9	810,807	1.2%
10	816,988	1.2%
11	790,130	1.2%
12	774,368	1.2%
13	744,924	1.1%
14	732,484	1.1%
15	712,733	1.1%

(Source: ONS, UK Population Data, 2018).

Therefore, young consumers are considered to be a highly lucrative market in the UK (and indeed across the western world) contributing billions to the UK economy each year. As Schor, (2005, p15) explains, “children's purchasing power and influence have exploded as they spend their days shopping and watching more television”.

2.3.2.1 Child-Targeted Advertising on Television

Indeed, it is an important point to note here that a significant amount of previous research has tended to focus on children’s understanding of television advertising in particular, as this was, and still is one of the most common types of commercial persuasion to which children have traditionally been exposed (Buijzen et al., 2010; Newman and Oates, 2012; De Jans et al., 2017). At its peak in 2013, children viewed 229.3 television advertisements per week in the UK, (ASA, 2019) although this figure has declined by approximately 38% as a result of changes in children’s media consumption habits from traditional to digital formats (ASA, 2019). Watching television is still considered to be one of the primary leisure activities for children (Newman and Oates, 2014; Zarouali, De Pauw, Walrave, Poels, Ponnet, Panic, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2019) and has remained a critical area of interest for academics (Blades, Oates and Li, 2012). However, the way that children access television programmes has evolved from viewing a single television set within a family environment to accessing

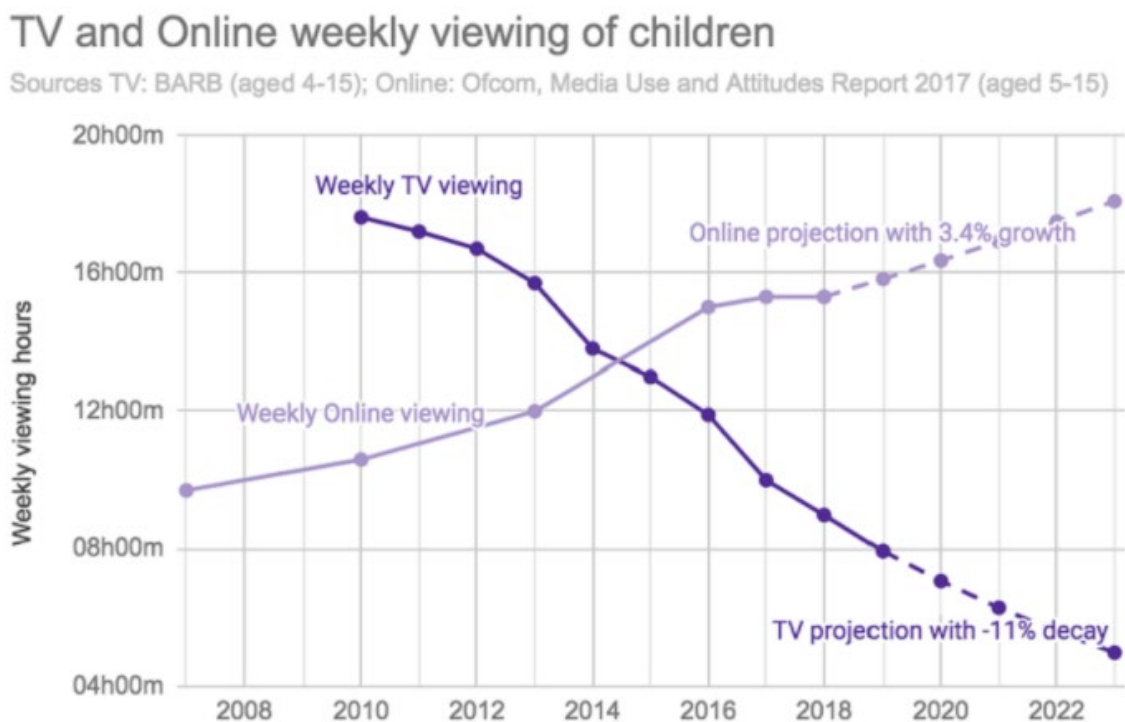
television on-demand services on tablets and mobile devices (Nicolini, Cassia and Bellotto, 2017) in their own personal spaces (Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017).

Despite this decline in traditional television viewing habits, children are still increasingly exposed to commercial persuasion, which is prevalent online (Lawlor et al., 2016).

2.3.2.2 Child-targeted Advertising Online

In fact, the UK has the third biggest online advertising market in the world (Benjamin, 2019). Advertising is the main revenue source for many Internet business models and has grown at a rate of 20% for the past five years, with the UK online advertising market generating £15.7bn in 2019 (Ofcom, 2020 p2). To illustrate this, Figure 1.1 indicates how children’s online viewing has overtaken television viewing since 2008 and how this trend is expected to continue over the course of this research project (i.e. 2019 - 2022).

Figure 2.3 TV and Online Weekly Viewing of UK Children



2.3.2.3 Children’s Influence on Family Spending

In addition to being a significant consumer group in their own right, children are also highly influential on family spending (Gunter and Furnham, 1998; Buckingham, 2000; Anitha and

Mohan, 2016). There is evidence to suggest that children use certain negotiation tactics to convince their caregivers to acquiesce to their requests, forcing them to buy products that they did not intend to purchase and suggesting that “children’s purchasing requests exacerbate budget strain” (Wingert, Zachary, Fox, Gittelsohn and Surkan 2014, p333). Previous research has tended to take a negative view of this influence, frequently using the term “pester power” to describe “the tendency of children, who are bombarded with marketers’ messages to unrelentingly request advertised items” from their caregivers (Henry and Borzekowski, 2011, p298). Parents may not realise the extent to which purchases are driven by prompts from children, but evidence suggests that twice as many purchases are triggered by children than parents are aware of (Ebster, Wagner and Neumueller, 2009). Despite being a term that is widely used in the literature (Ebster et al., 2009; Henry and Borzekowski, 2011) some have rejected the negative connotations associated with “pester power” and emphasised that children’s influence is not always considered to be a bad thing, indeed some parents welcome the input from their children when shopping for the family (Thomson, Laing and McKee, 2007). As McLeay and Oglethorpe (2013) suggest, the use of the neutral term “purchase request behaviour” may be more appropriate and representative of real-life interactions between children and their caregivers.

2.3.2.4 Shopping with Children

Some parents describe the experience of shopping with children as “undesirable” (Wingert, Zachary, Fox, Gittelsohn and Surkan 2014, p333) but often inevitable. Furthermore, certain physical characteristics of the supermarket increased the burden of shopping with children, particularly shelf placement of junk food items within children’s reach, which can increase children’s requests for unhealthy food (Wingert et al., 2014). Recent research into the implementation of ‘checkout-food policies’ that replace unhealthy items with healthy options in supermarkets revealed some evidence that this area can actually reduce the number of unhealthy foods purchased by customers (Ejlervskov et al., 2018). This has implications for retailers in terms of the potential to promote healthier diets (Ejlervskov et al., 2018) although this particular study is cautious in attributing the reduction in unhealthy foods purchased directly to the change in the placement of the product. Nevertheless, it does raise interesting questions regarding the influence of the retail environment itself on shopper behaviour.

2.3.2.5 Children’s Views on Point-of-Sale and Sales Promotions

Few studies have explored children’s views of point-of-sale marketing, which is briefly defined as “attempts to influence customers while they are in the shop” and can include “creative displays or signs” as tactics for capturing customers’ attention within a retail environment (Solomon, Marshall, Stuart, Barnes and Mitchell, 2013, p454).

Similarly, little is known about how children respond to sales promotions and offers in a retail environment (Boland, Connell and Erikson, 2012). Of the scant research that does exist, evidence suggests that while young children can recognise that common sales promotions such as buy one get one free (BOGOF) and ‘multi-buy’ offers “reduce regular prices”, they struggle to apply their maths skills to the shopping experience (Boland, et al., 2012, p277; Saxe, 1999). This means that when shopping on their own and confronted with multiple competing offers, they may make poor purchase decisions (Boland et al., 2012) which may have a negative impact on them. For example, children prefer BOGOF offers because they result in increased quantity, even if they end up spending more money (Boland et al., 2012). Arguably, learning to perceive value for money is one of the key skills involved when making purchase decisions (Williams, Ashill and Thirkell, 2016). From a health perspective, the UK government has raised concerns regarding the use of sales offers to promote snacks and unhealthy products. In fact, in its Childhood Obesity plan, the UK government states its intention to:

“ban price promotions such as BOGOFs and multi-buy offers or unlimited refills of unhealthy foods and drinks in the retail and out-of-home sector through legislation” (HM Government, 2018, p22).

2.3.3 The Rise of Social Media Use Amongst Children and Young People

Inevitably, the rise of social media use has fundamentally changed the way that children and young people access information, communicate with their peers (Sridhar, 2023) and gratify their social and emotional needs (Ofcom, 2022). According to recent statistics, 93% of children aged between 8 - 11 years spend an average of 13.5 hours per week (equating to two hours per day) online (Ofcom, 2022). Other statistics support assumptions that children’s lives are becoming increasingly digital in the UK as they are introduced to various entertainment and educational digital applications (hereafter referred to as apps) from as young as two years old (Ofcom, 2022). Indeed, electronic devices such as phones, laptops and iPads were at the top of most UK children’s Christmas lists in 2020 (PopJam, 2020).

In the UK, 35% of children aged 8-11 years old have their own mobile device and 47% have their own tablet (Ofcom, 2022).

2.3.3.1 Social Games and Virtual Worlds

Children aged 5 - 15 also spend a lot of time playing video games online, an activity that increases with age (Ofcom, 2022). In addition to fulfilling entertainment needs, gaming has “a strong social element” with 38% of 8 -11-year-olds using the online chat features to talk to others whilst playing a game (Ofcom, 2019, p7). Given the increasing amount of time that children spend playing games on their various devices (Ofcom, 2022) it is considered important to also explore the links between gaming and advertising in more depth.

At the time of writing, one of the most popular games for children in the UK is Roblox (PopJam, 2020). It is described as “a global platform that brings people together through play” (Roblox.com, 2021 n.p.) and unlike some other games, the majority of content on Roblox is user-generated, meaning it hosts multiple mini-games within the host game that are created by players themselves (Knorr, 2020). Like other virtual worlds that have been researched in the past such as Club Penguin (Marsh, 2014), Roblox allows players to create a character, which “serves as an online representation of themselves” (Marsh, 2011, p103). Roblox also allows players to create and customise various environments and chat with other players via instant messaging (Marsh, 2011). Roblox also has its own virtual marketplace, where players can purchase hundreds of items using the in-game currency Robux. Players can obtain Robux, which cost between £4.59 for 400 Robux and £18.49 for 1700 (Roblox.com, 2021 n.p.) At present, children under 18 years of age cannot make a monthly subscription to the game to pay for Robux, so they have to have their parent’s or guardian’s permission to make in-app purchases. Academic research into in-game advertising within social games like Roblox is scarce, but has been highlighted as an area of interest previously especially in terms of the ways these games are commercialised via the promotion of “virtual artefacts” such as pets and clothing (Marsh, 2011 p103). It is considered a relevant area of interest here because recent industry evidence suggests that not only is Roblox particularly popular in the UK, but children are also increasingly drawn towards the virtual marketplace that it symbolises. For example, in September 2020, the market research company PopJam surveyed 400 UK children and asked them what they would choose to spend £100 on if they were given it and the top answer was Robux, (PopJam, 2020).

From a children's marketing research perspective, this is clearly an underexplored area. However, research here into these environments, which enable children to be involved in transactions and exchanges of value, could provide valuable insights into children's understanding of the practice of marketplaces in real life.

2.3.3.2 Advergames

One area of contemporary advertising that has received some scholarly attention in recent years is that of the advergame (Mallinckrodt and Mizerski, 2007; Waiguny, Nelson and Terlutter, 2012; Panic et al., 2013; Verhellen, Oates, De Pelsmacker and Dens, 2014; Lee, Park and Wise, 2014). Advergames are described as "custom-built online game[s] designed to promote a company's brand" (van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2011, p34). According to van Reijmersdal et al., (2011) advergames can be distinguished from traditional marketing techniques because they involve an element of gameplay and the associated brand is often a subtle feature interwoven with the overall narrative and story of the game. This is in contrast to traditional advertising, where the brand is often much more prominent and the exposure much shorter. However, children may become so engrossed in the gameplay of an advergame that even prominent brand placement may go unnoticed (van Reijmersdal et al., 2011). Therefore, due to their highly immersive, fun and interactive nature, advergames are a very persuasive method of communicating commercial messages to children (Panic et al., 2013).

2.3.3.3 In-Game Advertising

In-Game advertising is a relatively new form of advertising and refers to the presence of advertisements within video games, apps and mobile games (Vyvey, Castellar and van Looy, 2018). It covers the placement of 'stand-alone' advertisements within digital games (i.e. advertisements from third-party sources, companies or brands that do not have a specific affiliation with the game). who embed communications that explicitly promote their products and services to the players

In-Game advertising involves the integration of commercial messages and/or brand placement with gameplay (Nelson, Keum and Yaros, 2004) in order to create positive associations in consumers' minds (Cauberghe and De Pelsmacker, 2010). It has become much more prevalent since the start of this PhD research in 2018. One of the defining

features of the video games and apps that are popular with school age children is the functionality that allows users to make purchases within the game.

2.3.3.4 Gacha Mechanisms

Many of the video games and mobile apps that are popular with children typically use Gacha mechanisms to power this functionality. The term "Gacha" originates from the Japanese word for capsule-toy vending machines ("gachapon" or "gashapon"), where users receive a random toy from a machine (Hornyak, 2017). Gacha mechanisms are a sophisticated form of content delivery system and monetisation, which closely resemble the defining features of slot machines or lotteries (Woods, 2020). This is somewhat alarming given their increasing prevalence within digital spaces specifically targeted towards children (Livingstone et al., 2018).

The strict rules that govern the ways in which gambling and betting services can be promoted in the UK. There are specific codes of practice relating to broadcast and non-broadcast communications as well as restrictions on brand and product placement in the media. These restrictions reflect current gambling legislation and are designed to ensure that companies target audiences responsibly by choosing the most appropriate media channels suitable for adults and taking care to minimise the risk that children and young people (i.e. those under the legal gambling age of 18 years) may inadvertently be exposed to age-inappropriate communications. These mechanisms encourage players to spend real or in-game currency to receive random virtual items, characters, or other rewards (Woods, 2020).

There are four main types of Gacha Mechanisms and their defining features are summarised in Table 2.5

Table 2.5 Types of Gacha Mechanism

Type of Gacha Mechanism	Description
1. Standard Gacha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Players receive one random item per pull. b) Items range from common to very rare.
2. Box Gacha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The pool of items is finite and players know all possible rewards in advance. b) As items are pulled, they are removed from the pool, increasing the chances of getting remaining items.

3. Step-Up Gacha:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Costs per pull increase or offer better rewards over multiple pulls. b) Often used to incentivize multiple purchases in a sequence.
4. Exchange Systems:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Players accumulate points or tokens with each pull, which can be exchanged for specific items. b) Provides a sense of progress and reduces the reliance on pure luck.

(Source: King and Delfabbro, 2018; DeCamp, 2020; Woods, 2020).

There are five key elements of Gacha Mechanisms summarised in Table 2.6

Table 2.6 Key elements of Gacha Mechanisms

Defining Feature	Description
1. Randomised Rewards:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Players spend currency to receive a random item from a predefined pool. b. The items vary in rarity, with some being very common and others extremely rare.
2. Virtual Currency:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Players often use in-game currency to participate in Gacha pulls. b. This currency can be earned through gameplay or purchased with real money.
3. Rarity and Collectability:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Items are categorised by their rarity, typically with a tier system (e.g., common, rare, super rare) b. The allure of collecting rare items drives players to spend more
4. Limited-Time Offers:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Gacha games often feature limited-time events with exclusive items b. These events create urgency and encourage players to spend more quickly
5. Pity Systems:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Some games include a pity system, ensuring players receive a rare item after a certain number of pulls b. This system aims to reduce frustration and maintain player engagement

(Source: King and Delfabbro, 2018; DeCamp, 2020; Woods, 2020)

These transactions can take place directly or through redirecting to an external platform such as Google Play. The cost of in-game purchases ranges from low value items that may boost performance or skip waiting times, to high value items such as an expansion pack or bundle

of in-game currency (e.g. Robux). Currency can be earned within the game but this is rare. Basic currency allows players to experience a somewhat limited version of the game.

2.3.4 The Increasing Prevalence of Embedded Marketing and Advertising Online

Concerns regarding stealth or implicit persuasion techniques in child-targeted content have been around for decades (Jaakkola, 2019), ever since Packard (1957) first suggested that advertisers were manipulating consumers by hiding subliminal messages in their advertisements. The key point to acknowledge here is the increasing ubiquity of embedded persuasion formats that permeate the digital media environment, but are much harder to recognise (Hudders et al., 2017; Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, 2018). It is evident that those who hold the responsibility for advertising regulation in the UK (and indeed across the world) acknowledge that the entertainment and informative content on social media is often heavily integrated with advertising (van Reijmersdal and Rozendaal, 2020). Hence, they remain focused on addressing the issue of the ever-expanding presence of contemporary marketing in children's lives, whilst also recognising the theoretical and practical challenges that this presents (Nelson, 2018).

As such, it is understandable that the concerns raised by these issues and their potential negative impacts on children has culminated in calls for new, up-to-date research that revisits existing conceptualisations of children's advertising literacy that predominantly rely on the cognitive recognition of advertising in some form (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012) and b), research that revisits those conceptualisations of advertising literacy that are based upon research into more traditional marketing formats such as television advertising (Buijzen et al., 2010; Nelson, 2019). According to the literature, a growing body of evidence suggests that people have considerable difficulty in recognising and making sense of the more embedded forms of advertising (Freeman and Shapiro, 2014; Wojdyski and Evans, 2016; Wojdyski et al., 2016; Krouwer, Poels and Paulessen, 2017). Two of the most common forms being native advertising and influencer marketing, both of which are becoming more commonplace online (Harms et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Hudders, De Jans and De Vierman, 2021).

2.3.4.1 Native Advertising

Native advertising is the term used to describe commercial content that is designed to reflect the language and style of other editorial content that surrounds it (Harms, Bijmolt and Hoekstra, 2017; De Vierman and Hudders, 2020; van Reijmersdal and Van Dam, 2020). Research in this area remains limited and previous studies have reported conflicting findings (Wojdynski and Evans, 2016). Whilst a small number of studies have been conducted into native advertising, these have mainly focused on news websites (Wojdynski et al., 2016; Wojdynski and Evans, 2016). Native advertising appears to be more effective at persuading consumers than other types of online advertising, such as 'pop-up' and banner adverts (Wang and Huang, 2017), although the reasons for its apparent effectiveness are unclear (Wojdynski and Evans, 2016). Part of its success could be due to consumers failing to recognise that such content is advertising at all (Wojdynski and Evans, 2016, p157) which raises ethical concerns over customer deception. According to Harms et al., (2017) native advertising could be seen as more credible than other forms of advertising because it contains an extra level of detail that is absent from other advertisements. Furthermore, consumers may respond more positively to native advertising because they find its subtle nature less irritating (Nairn, 2008; Tutaj and van Reijmersadal, 2012). Previous research suggests that the type of device used to access online content can also play a role in advertising's effectiveness. For example, embedded or native advertising may be particularly effective on mobile devices because the lack of other competing advertisements on a small screen commands more attention (Grewal et al., 2016; Harms et al., 2017).

2.3.4.2 Influencer Marketing

Another increasingly popular technique is that of influencer marketing, where prominent, well-known media personalities and celebrities are involved in the promotion of specific products or services to their followers on social networking sites (Lou and Yuan, 2019). According to the existing literature, influencer marketing has become highly prevalent on social media sites such as Instagram (De Vierman et al., 2019) and YouTube (Hwang and Zhang, 2018) because of the potential to reach a large number of customers instantaneously. For instance, some prominent YouTube vloggers have over 100 million subscribers to their channels (Hwang and Zhang, 2018; Lou and Yan, 2019). Influencers typically receive a free product in exchange for a positive review or are paid for the promotion in the hope that it will influence the opinions of their followers (Rasmussen et al., 2022).

The concept of influencer marketing has traditionally been defined in similar terms to the concept of thought leadership. Essentially, people who are considered to be experts in a particular field are often perceived to have more authority and therefore, more influence over the opinions of others (Barry, 2015). These people are commonly referred to as social media influencers (Hudders, De Jans and De Vierman, 2020; Rasmussen et al., 2022) although the terms micro-celebrities (Gaenssle and Budzinski, 2020) and micro-influencers (De Vierman et al., 2019) have also been used to describe social media influencers. Once only associated with celebrities and their endorsement of brands, the scope of the term ‘influencer’ within marketing has expanded to include ordinary people, if they have a large enough audience or following online. Although, it is not clear at what point they stop being ordinary and become “instafamous” on Instagram (Djafarova and Rushworth 2017, p6), “TikTok famous” on Tik Tok (Shaw, 2020) or truly famous in the traditional sense (Hwang and Zhang, 2018). Influencers are essentially Internet celebrities (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2012). These “digital celebrities” are typically ordinary people who have become famous through online blogging, vlogging or content creation (Hwang and Zhang, 2018, p155) and evidence suggests that their advice and recommendations can positively influence followers’ purchase intentions (Kim, Ko and Kim, 2015; Lee and Watkins, 2016).

In its traditional sense, Brown and Hayes (2008, p49) state that:

“Influence can be broadly defined as the power to affect a person, thing or course of events. Influence manifests itself in many ways, from direct purchase advice to subtle shifts in perception of a vendor’s credibility”.

In the context of social media platforms, De Vierman et al., (2016) posit that influence is the ability to successfully shape the opinions of followers regarding the products and services that are included in their online content. As such, many brands are now seeking out social influencers who appeal to their target customers and have an established following to promote their products on social media (De Jans, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2018; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Gerrath and Usrey, 2020). Sweeney et al., (2021, p55) describe the ‘pull’ approach of influencer marketing, where the onus is on the consumer to actively search for and consume an influencers’ content, which differs significantly from the ‘push’ approach of traditional marketing. Food items are becoming increasingly popular subjects of influencers’ videos (Amra and Elma, 2022) often featuring as part of a “taste-test” (Castonguay and Messina, 2022a, p228) or as a part of a challenge.

As an emerging area of interest, academic research into influencer marketing is still relatively limited compared to more other digital formats (De Jans et al., 2018; Ferchaud et al., 2018; Munukka, Maity, Reinikainen, and Luoma-aho, 2019; van Dam and van Reijmersdal, 2019) and even more scarce in terms of children (Boerman and van Reijmersdal, 2016; De Vierman, Hudders and Nelson, 2019; Hudders, De Jans and De Vierman, 2020; Sweeney et al., 2021; Loose et al., 2023). This is the case despite a steep incline in the number of studies over the past three years (Hudders et al., 2020) because most of these have been conducted with adults (van Reijmersdal and van Dam, 2020). Hence, there remains a significant research gap in terms of children's understanding of influencer marketing and it "is a rich area for exploration within the context of advertising literacy [research]" (Sweeney et al., 2021, p55).

To the researcher's best knowledge at the time of writing, one experimental study currently exists on children's interactions with sponsored vlog content on social media, (De Jans et al., 2018) one relates specifically to sponsored Instagram stories (Balaban et al., 2022), there are three studies on adolescents' perceptions of influencer marketing, (van Dam and van Reijmersdal, 2019; van Reijmersdal and van Dam, 2020; Sweeney et al., 2021), two on the impact of influencer marketing on children's eating behaviours (Coates et al., 2019; Castonguay and Messina, 2022b) and one on young consumers' perceptions of covert marketing within blog content (Liljander et al., 2015). In addition, just two studies have focused on children's interactions with brands in general on social media, (Lawlor et al., 2016; Jones and Glynn, 2019) one on children's responses to multiformat online advertising (Lampert, Schulze and Dreyer, 2021) and one on children's responses to personalised advertisements (Desimpelaere, Hudders and Van de Sompel, 2022).

Aside from these studies, hardly any attention has been given to children's understanding of influencer marketing or sponsored content on video-sharing platforms (VSPs) such as YouTube (Evans, Hoy and Childers, 2018; Rasmussen et al., 2022) and TikTok. As such, this is considered to be a gap in the literature because of the popularity of these two VSPs amongst children and young people, based on statistics suggesting that over 98% of children aged 8 -15 used a video-sharing platform (VSP) in 2019 (Ofcom, 2020).

2.3.4.3 Advertising on TikTok

According to Acker, (2022), TikTok is one of the fastest growing social media apps in the world. Previously known as Music.ly, TikTok is a video-sharing-platform. TikTok enables

users to upload short (circa 15 seconds) videos of themselves dancing or miming to music (Tidy, 2019). Statistics from the UK communications regulator; Ofcom show that during the first year of this PhD research, TikTok usage grew exponentially in the UK from 5.4 million to 12.9 million users in the space of just four months; January 2019 to April 2019 (Ofcom, 2020). Media commentators have speculated that TikTok's continued growth is the result of the app's incredibly efficient algorithms, which learn the types of content that users enjoy based on what they have already watched much faster than rival video-sharing platforms, such as YouTube (Tidy and Smith-Galer, 2020). Interestingly, recent evidence suggests that the majority of TikTok's user base is pre-adolescent children, despite the application's 13+ age restriction (Bucknell-Bossen and Kottasz, 2020). Furthermore, Ofcom reported in May 2022 that 16% of British toddlers are now accessing the app too (Ofcom, 2022).

TikTok is positioned as a creative expression application, based on its in-app editing software, which enables users to add filters to their videos and choose a soundtrack from a database of hundreds of songs (Tidy and Smith-Galer, 2020). Often these songs are uncensored, meaning that they contain profanity or lyrics that many would consider inappropriate for a pre-adolescent audience. At the time of writing, a google search for the "most popular TikTok songs of 2020" revealed a list of the ten most played songs on the app during 2020, (Duribe, 2020) 50% of which featured a warning for explicit lyrics.

Furthermore, several TikTok "Trends" have caused concern among parents for promoting anti-social or dangerous behaviour in children and young people. For example, the popular "Cereal Challenge" encourages users to use a friend's mouth as a bowl to eat cereal from, which is relatively easy to recreate at home, despite being unhygienic (Scott, 2020). In addition, several teenagers in the USA were admitted to hospital in 2020 for overdosing on the antihistamine Benadryl (diphenhydramine) after watching a TikTok video that claimed that taking at least 12 tablets would get them high (Scott, 2020).

Despite the risk to reputation from being associated with a dangerous TikTok trend as experienced by Benadryl in the USA, when a TikTok challenge or trend "goes viral" (i.e. spreads widely and rapidly on the Internet) and is well received by users then the associated brand can also experience increased popularity and sales as a result. For example in 2020, one video uploaded to TikTok by an ordinary (i.e. non-famous) American man Nathan Apodaca (otherwise known as Doggface208 on the app) featured him riding his skateboard,

listening to the song “Dreams” by rock band Fleetwood Mac and drinking Ocean Spray brand cranberry juice directly from the bottle. In less than a week, the video had been viewed in excess of 26 million times across the world, spawning many parody videos including one featuring original band member Mick Fleetwood himself. The positive publicity for Ocean Spray could not have been predicted, yet the brand’s marketing team were reportedly slow to capitalise on the video’s popularity (Watson, 2020). The brand eventually responded by gifting Nathan Apodaca a brand-new car, which was loaded with Ocean Spray cranberry juice (Watson, 2020). Furthermore, the song “Dreams” became the most downloaded song on Apple’s iTunes store, 43 years after it was originally released (Watson, 2020). From an advertising perspective, some experts have expressed the opinion that the video should be regarded as Ocean Spray’s “best commercial of all time” (Vaynerchuk, 2020 n.p.).

As Vaynerchuk, (2020 n.p.) explains:

“It’s incredible that people in the [advertising] industry don’t recognize that this [TikTok] video was more impactful than the tens of millions of dollars Ocean Spray has spent on advertising over the past decades to drive general awareness, be considered by people and keep their interest.”

Unsurprisingly, TikTok’s capacity to cause a sensation and growing popularity with young audiences (under 30s) means that many brands are now eschewing traditional marketing techniques and established albeit less popular digital methods such as ‘pop-ups’ or banner advertisements (Nairn, 2008) in favour of promoting their products via engaging content on the app (Bucknell-Bossen and Kottasz, 2020). However, as highlighted earlier, academic research into commercially-motivated or sponsored content on TikTok is almost non-existent. According to TikTok’s own website, the success of commercial content on the platform is because of its data-driven specificity, allowing marketers to target relevant audiences with content that is likely to appeal directly to their personal tastes and interests (TikTok.com, 2021). At present, TikTok offers four paid-for advertising options as shown in Table 2.7

Table 2.7 Paid-for Advertising Options on TikTok

Brand Takeover	Featuring an image, GIF or a video-based advertisement that allows one brand to dominate a specific topic for the day
In-feed native video	Vertical 9-15 second video ads that show up on the “For You” page
Hashtag challenge	Brands can create sponsored hashtags to encourage user-generated content, engage users and attract influencers

Branded lenses	Brands can create 2D or 3D lenses that users can try out for themselves
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(Source: TikTok, 2023).

2.3.4.4 Advertising on YouTube

Paid-for advertising is a key feature of other VSPs such as YouTube, for example in the form of pre-roll advertisements (Evans, Hoy and Carpenter-Childers, 2018), mid-roll advertisements (Vanwesenbeeck, Hudders and Ponnet, 2020) and product placement in the videos (Rohde and Mau, 2021). YouTube is popular with children of all ages (Ofcom, 2022). Eighty percent of children in the UK use YouTube, making it one of the largest kids' digital entertainment and advertising platforms". Evidence from a recent Monitor Preschool Report (2020) suggests that half of all preschool (0-4 years) households in the UK regularly access content through YouTube or the YouTube Kids app (Childwise, 2020). Furthermore, YouTube's popularity has increased significantly in recent years among the 8-11 years age group, with just under half preferring to watch YouTube content over television programmes (Ofcom, 2022).

Crucially, many young consumers spend a lot of time watching videos on YouTube and it is reasonable to assume that some of this time will also include exposure to some form of commercial persuasion, particularly where the videos have an underlying commercial agenda. This is particularly salient in the case of videos relating to toys, which are still "central to children's play" (Jaakkola, 2019, p1) even in an age of increased media consumption and screen-time. Hence, toy reviews and toy "unboxing" videos have evolved into a highly effective method of marketing new toys to young audiences (Marsh, 2015; Loose, Hudders, De Jans and Vanwesenbeeck, 2023) mainly because they are an extremely popular form of entertainment for children and financially lucrative for manufacturers (Jaakkola, 2019).

For example, in the UK, one of the most-watched toy review channels on YouTube is "Ryan's World", managed by the family of nine-year-old Ryan Kaji from the USA. At the time of writing, Ryan's World has approximately 41.7m subscribers and 12.2bn views (Neate, 2020, n.p.). In 2020, Ryan reportedly earned \$29.5m (£22m) from his YouTube channel, as well as a substantial sum (estimated to be around £145m) from the sale of licensed merchandise such as Ryan's World branded toys and clothing (Neate, 2020). Part of

the reason for this success could be due to the fact that YouTube channels have the potential to reach a far greater audience with commercially-motivated messages because they have far greater audience figures than traditional television programmes (Jaakkola, 2019). Again, using Ryan's World as an example, one of his videos; 'Huge Eggs Surprise Toy Challenge' has amassed over two billion views online, making it one of the most watched videos of all time on YouTube at the time of writing (Neate, 2020, n.p.).

In addition to toy unboxing videos, research also highlights that children like to watch YouTube videos that relate to their offline interests, such as music, make-up, sports and pranks (Loose et al., 2023; De Jans et al., 2018; Marsh, 2015). Many children experience gratification from watching videos of other children taking part in hands-on activities, such as arts and crafts "to the extent where they no longer take part in these activities themselves" (Ofcom, 2019, p32). YouTube plays a significant role in reflecting and amplifying current crazes, given its important role in the circulation of children's popular cultural practices (Scott et al., 2023). Children also enjoy "sensory" videos, such as watching others make and play with slime because they feature "satisfying noises" (Ofcom, 2019, p36). These have been described as 'Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response' (ASMR) videos because they can increase a feeling of well-being and relaxation in some people (Ofcom, 2019). Yet, compared to traditional marketing formats, very little is currently known within marketing or sociology research about children's interaction with YouTube videos beyond the statistics relating to time spent online and type of device used (De Jans et al., 2018; Evans et al., 2018).

Theoretically, one could argue that there are similarities between watching television and watching videos on YouTube, as Stokel-Walker (2019, p243) describes "YouTube is essentially a TV channel just for the individual, tailored algorithmically to tickle their tastes with an endless, ever-expanding pool of videos to pick from". Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that theories based on children's television consumption may also be valid in the context of watching YouTube videos (Vanwesenbeeck, Hudders and Ponnet, 2020). The differences lie within the boundaries between entertainment and commercial content as it appears on the two formats. Advertisements on television are often easily identifiable for children, for example, through audio-visual clues such as jingles (Oates et al., 2012). Whereas, the nature of advertising on YouTube is much more subtle, often embedded or disguised, and evidence suggests that many viewers, including adults have difficulty

distinguishing commercial content from entertainment on YouTube (Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, 2018; van Reijmersdal and Rozendaal, 2020). Indeed, children appear to be less critical about embedded advertising in general (Nairn and Fine, 2008; Owen, Lewis, Auty and Buijzen, 2009) and that which punctuates the content on YouTube (Vanwesenbeeck, Hudders and Ponnet, 2020).

Regardless of format, the deliberately covert nature of embedded marketing has raised concerns over customer deception for industry regulators. Accordingly, industry guidelines now exist to reduce the possibility of consumer deception (Krouwer et al., 2017) yet the practice of online advertising is still not nearly as regulated as more traditional forms of advertising such as television commercials and print advertisements (Panic et al., 2013).

2.3.5 Advertising Restrictions

Indeed, many restrictions on advertising to children exist within the UK, in order to protect them from harmful, misleading or exploitative communications, policies which are based primarily on the assumption that they are less likely to be “able to understand and process the commercial messages in adverts than adults” (ASA, 2019, n.p). The advertising industry in the UK is self-regulatory, which means that the responsibility for adhering to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) guidelines lies with the advertisers rather than with the platform or channel on which an advertisement is shown or displayed to its target audience.

2.3.5.1 Food Advertising Restrictions

Unsurprisingly, given the concerns about the links between marketing and childhood obesity as outlined earlier, food marketing is an area where there have been many restrictions. In the UK for example, advertisements for HFSS foods cannot be targeted to children (categorised as those under 16 years of age) in any form of media where >25% of the audience is <16 years old (Advertising Association, 2023). Despite this, evidence suggests that children in the UK are exposed to over 15 billion adverts for products high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) online every year (gov.uk, 2020) via various formats. Cairns et al., (2009) found that viral marketing, which relies on peer-to-peer dissemination online, appears to be more common on food and drinks websites for children than those targeted at adults. Furthermore, in an exploratory study from The Netherlands, Folkvord, Bevelander, Rozendaal and Hermans (2019), found that food and drinks products, (such as those from fast food chains

McDonald's and KFC and energy drink brands such as Red Bull), were the most common products seen in online vlogs.

Therefore, the UK government have made the rules in this area even stricter by introducing a ban on all advertising of HFSS products before 9pm on broadcast media and online (gov.uk, 2020), which also includes advertisements for yoghurts and sandwiches as well as the more recognisable 'junk' foods, such as pizza, fries and hamburgers (Internet Advertising Bureau UK, 2020). On the whole, the advertising industry reacted negatively to this, with a joint statement issued from the Advertising Association (AA), the Incorporated Society of British Advertisers (ISBA), The Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) and the Internet Advertising Bureau (IAB). The industry argued that an outright ban on HFSS advertising would only reduce children's calorie consumption by approximately 1.4%. Therefore, the ban is a "severe and disproportionate measure that goes far beyond the government's objective of protecting children" (Cox, 2020, n.p). The opinion that advertising does not cause childhood obesity also has some support from academia. For example, Rossiter (2019, p281) poses the question:

"If there was no significant child obesity problem in the pre-regulation era when children were exposed to more junk food advertising than they are today, how can today's junk-food advertising possibly be blamed for today's problem?"

Concerns regarding the links between exposure to HFSS food advertising and childhood obesity are never far from the political agenda. Indeed, the UK has some of the toughest restrictions on food advertising in the world. Despite this, product placement for HFSS foods in children's media is a common practice, and many "under the radar" persuasive messages that promote the consumption of HFSS foods still exist in non-commercial contexts, such as in computer games and blogs (Nairn and Fine, 2008, p462). However, this type of communication is rarely classified as product placement per se. Most likely, this is because it does not have a clear commercial agenda or call to action and does not mention a specific brand. Product placement of 'fictional' HFSS foods in children's content is not currently subject to the same level of scrutiny or regulation as more direct forms of advertising in the UK. Perhaps one of the barriers to effective regulation could be that the terms commonly used in regulatory initiatives and policy guidelines for HFSS foods such as "targeted at children," "clearly directed primarily to children" or "children's advertisements" (ASA, 2023, n.p.) are "overly simplistic and highly ambiguous" and as a result "circumvent or

ignore some of the basic features of marketing communications such as the use of symbolism” as argued by Hebden et al., (2011, p780).

2.3.5.2 Advertising Placements and Rules

In the UK, the ASA has rules concerning the placement of on and offline advertisements, for example not allowing anything “overtly sexual” to be displayed within 100 yards of a school and restricting online advertisement placements so that they are age appropriate (ASA, 2019 n.p.). The ASA (2019) also stipulates that;

“Marketing communications addressed to or targeted at children must not make a direct exhortation to children to buy an advertised product or persuade their parents or other adults to buy an advertised product for them.”

However, when researching the topic, it became apparent that many marketing communications *do* circumvent the “direct exhortation” rule, and as such can be extremely effective at persuading children. For example, in 2011, a television advertisement for a UK supermarket ‘Morrison’s’ featured several unhappy children who were shown to cheer up at the prospect of a visit to a Morrison’s store to buy Walt Disney cards. The advertisement showed a child excitedly opening a packet of Walt Disney cards and finding a gold card, accompanied by a voiceover stating: “find a gold card, and you could even win one of a thousand stays at Disneyland Paris.” (ASA, 2020, n.p.) The ASA ruled that the advertisement included several factors that were likely to appeal directly to children, such as the collectable cards and the chance to win a holiday. The final scene of the advertisement also featured the child waking an adult early in the morning to go to Morrison’s, which was considered to be direct encouragement to children to ask their parents or guardians to take them to Morrison’s to buy Walt Disney cards, which was in breach of the UK code of Broadcast Advertising (BCAP) on responsible advertising. As such, the advertisement was eventually banned by the ASA. Hebden et al., (2011) also found that the food advertisements in their sample were four times more likely to address parents directly, as a way of getting around the direct exhortation rule and also as a way of increasing the likelihood that the advertised product will be purchased by the parent on behalf of their children (Jones, Wiese and Fabrianesi, 2008).

2.3.5.3 Advertising Disclosure Cues on Social Media

In the UK, the ASA prepared guidance for social media influencers regarding the disclosure of sponsored content (ASA, 2022, n.p).

It states that:

“When a brand rewards an influencer with a payment, free gift, or other perk, any resulting posts become subject to consumer protection law. When a brand also has control over the content, they become subject to the UK Advertising Code as well.”

This guidance emphasises the importance of communicating the commercial nature of a post. As a result, influencers or content producers will usually include some sort of hint that a post has been orchestrated in some way to promote a particular product, place or service. These disclosure cues, include the use of #ad, #paidad and/or #sponsored and are often the only evidence that seemingly genuine online content is actually an advertisement (Evans, Phua, Lim and Jun, 2017; De Pauw et al., 2018).

Overall, studies into the effectiveness of different disclosure formats (i.e. verbal, textual or visual) report mixed results (Kay et al., 2022). Evidence suggests that when the persuasive intent of content is made more obvious with the presence of a disclosure clue, customers are generally more sceptical of this and thus react more negatively towards the featured brand (De Vierman and Hudders, 2019). Although, the type of disclosure cue used can reduce some of this negativity. For example, Stubb, Nyström and Colliander, (2019) found that where vlog content included a verbal justification (from the source) for receiving money, this was more effective at reducing negative responses to paid-for social media posts than simple ‘this-post-is-sponsored’ type disclosures. Furthermore, Gerrath and Usrey (2020, p15) found that in the case of product reviews, where a disclosure cue references a source’s “personal reasons for accepting a deal with a brand” (as opposed to financial gain) then this can also reduce follower’s negativity towards the review. These studies provide some useful insights into consumers’ attitudes towards sponsored content, however like many others in this emerging research stream (e.g. Raun et al., 2018; McCormick, 2016) they have just focused on adults (Boerman et al., 2018). Of the few studies that have explored children’s (7 - 16 years old) responses to disclosure cues specifically, Hoek et al., (2020 p12) found that the presence of an advertising disclosure cue shown for 10 seconds and portrayed as “[name vlogger] has been paid by [name company] to advertise in this video” (based on a previous study by van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, Hudders, Vanwesenbeeck, Cauberghe and Van Berlo, 2020) prior to exposure to prominent brand placement in a vlog, did not increase children’s ability to recognise the commercial intent of the vlog.

Generally speaking, previous research has validated that consumers must see a cue in order to recognise something as an advertisement (De Vierman and Hudders, 2019), but to be effective in communicating commercial intent, cues not only need to be noticed, but

“consciously processed” (Krouwer et al., 2017, p125). Where disclosure cues are missing or hidden, then paid-for endorsements can appear genuine (Kay et al., 2022). Several studies have attempted to examine the effectiveness of online advertising disclosure cues in advergames (An and Stern, 2011; Verhellen, Oates, De Pelsmacker and Dens, 2014) social games (Rozendaal, Slot, and van Reijmersdal, 2013) and in vlogs (Hoek, Rozendaal, van Schie, van Reijmersdal and Buijzen, 2020). If commercial messages are highly integrated with the content, for example in sponsored YouTube videos (Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, 2018) the persuasive intent will be harder to recognise, which in turn is less likely to trigger critical processing (Buijzen et al., 2010). Furthermore, where the persuasive intent is made more conspicuous with the presence of a disclosure clue, customers may react more negatively towards the featured brand (De Vierman and Hudders, 2019; van Dam and van Reijmersdal, 2019) which may deter influencers from being transparent about their commercial motives and may potentially mislead consumers. Understandably, important questions have been raised over the ethics of allowing children to be exposed to misleading marketing that they may not be able to recognise and understand. There have been calls for new research to better understand children’s advertising literacy in today’s digital society (Nelson, 2018). Therefore, this PhD research answers this call by exploring children’s perceptions of contemporary advertising formats and the implications this has for their advertising literacy.

2.3.6 Defining and Measuring ‘Influence’ in Contemporary Advertising Research

One of the issues arising from scant literature on influencer marketing with children is a lack of clarity surrounding the process of qualifying and measuring influence. For instance, it could be that influence is simply calculated by number of followers (i.e. more followers equates to more influence). On the one hand, evidence suggests that a high number of followers is likely to increase a person’s perceived popularity and likeability (De Vierman et al. 2016) which could be considered to be important characteristics for capturing customers’ attention in an age of over-saturation of commercial messages (Rohde and Mau, 2021). Indeed, some TikTok accounts also have in excess of 100 million followers, such as the American teenager Charlie D’Amelio (Gluck, 2020). On the other hand, popularity may not necessarily equate to influence. In other words, a high number of followers could simply signify a person’s potential reach, but that person may be no more influential than someone with a small following.

2.3.6.1 What Can We Learn from Analysing Source Characteristics?

Based on the evidence discussed so far, it appears that influencer marketing is highly effective at persuading consumers (Munukka et al., 2019; De Vierman, Hudders and Nelson, 2019) because “influencers... complement traditional branding communication by serving as an embodied presentation of their personal tastes and clothing choices” (Audrezet, de Kerviler and Moulard, 2020, p557). Therefore, it is important to examine the persuasive potential of the characteristics of influencers themselves. In the specific context of influencer marketing, Sweeney et al., (2021, p56) argue that researchers should focus on young consumers’ ability to correctly “identify the source of the advertising message and the ability to recognise the specific tactics being deployed”.

2.3.6.2 Parasocial Interaction and Relationships on Social Media

One potential explanation for the appeal of online influencers is that of Parasocial interaction (hereafter referred to as PSI), which in the context of marketing can be defined as “an illusionary experience, such that consumers interact with personas (i.e. mediated representations of presenters, celebrities, or characters) as if they are present and engaged in a reciprocal relationship” (Labrecque, 2014, p135). In other words, people can experience a form of pseudo-friendship with an influencer online (Perse and Rubin, 1989; Lee and Watkins, 2016) through psychological associations and feelings of intimacy (Rubin and Step, 2000). Recent evidence from this emerging stream of research suggests that children do form special relationships with their favourite social media influencers (De Jans et al., 2018; van Dam and van Reijmersdal, 2019). Strong Parasocial relationships can also increase a person’s loyalty to brands that are endorsed by social media influencers online and their willingness to consider influencers’ opinions when making their own decisions (Labrecque, 2014). Some of the explanations for this relate to influencers’ use of certain personal messaging strategies in their content (Hudders et al., 2020). For example, through posting autobiographical stories of their life (Enke and Borchers, 2019) and by sharing intimate information (Zheng et al., 2023) which can increase feelings of connection among followers (Hudders et al., 2020). Parasocial interaction has been used to explain the relationships between traditional celebrities and media users (Rubin, Perse and Powell, 1985; Stever and Lawson, 2013) which are typically one-sided (Lee and Watkins, 2016). Yet, the growing role of social media channels and their associated discourse has renewed interest in PSI (Yates, 2015) and its potential to explain users’ interactions with media personalities online, for

example, the relationships between YouTube celebrities and their subscribers (e.g. Lee and Watkins, 2016).

Insights into children's experience of Parasocial relationships in general are lacking. Of the research that does exist, the focus has been on fictional television characters and traditional media (Hoffner, 1996; Jennings and Alper, 2016), rather than on celebrities or social influencers. Whilst not expressed as a Parasocial interaction explicitly, Jones and Glynn (2019, p94) do make reference to the opportunities that virtual environments create for interactions between children, celebrities and communities of other fans. In addition, evidence suggests that children admire social media influencers who are also children, as they believe they share similar hobbies and interests with them (Van Dam and van Reijmersdal, 2019). Furthermore, YouTube has a social function, in that viewers can interact with each other in the comments section that accompanies a video (Xiao, Wang and Chan-Olmsted, 2018) which theoretically may facilitate the creation of new peer relationships (Ahn, 2013; Jones and Glynn, 2019). In addition, if "reciprocity" between vlogger and audience can increase trust (Munnukka et al., 2019, p232) then this may also foster the creation of a Parasocial relationship. What is apparent from research with adults is that Parasocial relationships share many similarities with conventional relationships and friendships (Horton and Wohl, 1956; Chu and Cho, 2017) such as mutual fondness and frequent contact (Fehr, 1996).

2.3.6.3 Source Credibility Theory

In addition to Parasocial Interaction Theory, it may be possible to explain why some people are perceived to be more influential than others by drawing on Source Credibility Theory (Ohanian, 1990). Source Credibility Theory argues that a person's physical appearance and their assumed level of expertise can have an effect on others' perceptions of their credibility. The perceived credibility of the message source (i.e. an influencer) is thought to increase the likelihood that a message (i.e. a marketing message) will be accepted (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977). Traditionally used to explain celebrity endorsement, this theory suggests that positive views about the endorser (i.e. high levels of attractiveness and likeability) foster perceptions of trustworthiness and expertise, which leads to positive attitudes towards the message that are ultimately transferred on to the brand (Munnukka et al., 2019; Goldsmith, Lafferty and Newall, 2000). Source Credibility Theory (Ohanian, 1990) suggests that a person's physical appearance can heavily influence others' perceptions of them. Psychologists refer to this

principle as ‘what is beautiful is good’ (Lemay, Clark and Greenberg, 2010; Lorenzo, Biesanz and Human, 2010). In simple terms, the more attractive someone appears, the more influence they have over others. There is some evidence in support of this theory from social media research. For example, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) found that the attractiveness of an influencer affects how users engage with content on Instagram. However, whilst this may be the case within fashion (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017) it is unclear how important attractiveness is in terms of influence in other contexts.

2.3.6.4 Influencers’ Expertise

Influencers are perceived as experts on their chosen topics, (Xiao, Wang and Chan-Olmsted, 2018) which could explain why this type of marketing is influential for young people, for example in the case of product reviews, (Wiley, 2014) make-up tutorials (De Jans et al., 2018) or toy unboxing videos (Marsh, 2015). Again, drawing from Source Credibility Theory (Ohanian, 1990) a person’s assumed level of expertise can have an effect on others’ perceptions of their credibility. Positive views about the endorser (i.e. high levels of attractiveness and likeability) foster perceptions of trustworthiness and expertise, which leads to positive attitudes towards the message, which are ultimately transferred on to the brand (Goldsmith, Lafferty and Newall, 2000; Munnukka, Maity, Reinikainen and Luoma-aho, 2019). In an online context, evidence suggests that exposure to a persuasive attempt often leads to attitudinal changes towards the featured brand (Tutaj and van Reijmersdal., 2012). According to Azjen and Fishbein, (1977) attitude is a reliable predictor of behaviour and as behavioural effects usually relate to conversions online, these attitude changes could lead to an intent to purchase (Moran, Muzellec and Nolan, 2014). With influencer marketing, the influencer takes on the role of endorser, defined as “anyone who enjoys public recognition and who uses this recognition on behalf of a consumer good by appearing with it in an advertisement” (McCracken, 1989, p310).

2.3.6.5 Influencers’ Trustworthiness

Trust is also an increasingly important quality for influencers. Interestingly, some studies have indicated that the content produced by so-called ordinary people is perceived as being more trustworthy (Paek, Hove, Jeong and Kim 2011) more authentic (Lim, Chung and Weaver, 2012) and more accessible (Paek et al., 2011) than that produced by brands or experts.

As Munnukka et al., (2019, p232) state:

“Vloggers’ ability to provide a perception of reciprocity is sufficient for increasing the trust of the audience towards the vlogger and [foster] greater acceptance of the brand endorsement”.

Brand endorsements are often presented as an expression of enthusiasm (Edensor, Leslie, Millington and Rantisi, 2009) particularly in family-oriented social media accounts, which typically feature children’s everyday lives and routines (Jaakkola, 2019). This enthusiasm, coupled with a sense of amateurism (Abidin, 2017) or “everyday expertise” (Jaakkola, 2019, p3) means that most of these endorsements are often completely integrated into the media content that children are viewing at the time (De Vierman et al., 2019).

2.3.6.6 Influencer’s Authenticity

Furthermore, evidence suggests that authenticity is an important factor in the success of influencer marketing (Abidin and Ots, 2016). Recent research by Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard (2020) suggests that a distinction can be made between two types of authenticity in influencer marketing content. Firstly, they argue that ‘passionate’ authenticity “refers to the notion that authentic people or brands are those that are intrinsically motivated rather than extrinsically motivated” (Audrezet et al., 2020 p565). In other words, a type of authenticity that relates to a genuine affinity, or altruistic motivations for promoting a product rather than financial gain.

In contrast, ‘transparent’ authenticity refers to

“fact-based information about the product or service at the center of the brand partnership. Also entails disclosing information about the contractual terms of the partnership with the particular brand, as well as [sharing] unedited content.” (Audrezet et al., 2020, p565).

In addition, when it comes to sponsored content, Ferchaud et al., (2018) suggest that vloggers’ self-disclosure is associated with higher levels of authenticity and realism. On YouTube in particular, “[a]uthenticity (at least the semblance of it) is the glue that binds YouTubers and fans together” (Stokel-Walker, 2019, p176). Authenticity is clearly an important quality to consumers and brands in helping to facilitate relationships between endorsers and their audiences and in increasing positive perceptions of the product or service that is being promoted. However, authenticity can be difficult to communicate effectively as some studies have shown that many consumers, including adults, struggle to distinguish real and honest opinions within commercial content online.

It is important to note that not all endorsements are commercially motivated (Audrezet et al., 2020). However, where an endorsement has been incentivised, that is presented in exchange for some form of direct compensation such as cash, or indirect in the form of free products (Uribe et al., 2016) then this may be perceived in a negative way by followers (Eisend, van Reijmersdal, Boerman and Tarrahi 2020). These negative perceptions may be more likely to occur where the promotion of brands or products becomes a regular feature of an influencer's content (Gerrath and Usrey, 2020). However, Djafarova and Rushworth, (2017, p6) found evidence to the contrary, where awareness of an influencer's financial gain did not deter participants' desire for purchase based on a belief that celebrities would not risk their reputation "by posting disingenuous reviews". Hence, it could be discerned that different motivations for posting content and the ways in which these are communicated may affect customers' perceptions of that content in different ways.

2.3.6.7 Influencers' Personalities

In contrast, others have posited that it is not content per se, but rather an individual's personality that determines how they relate to information about others (Hegleson and Mickleson, 1995). Freberg, Graham, McGaughey and Freberg, (2011) found that social media influencers are seen as smart, ambitious and poised people. However, this particular study relied upon a relatively small sample of adult participants (n=32) who were given a list of pre-determined traits to choose from therefore may not represent attributes that children find influential. Although, there is an argument to suggest that personality can be an important factor in determining influence on children. For example, recent research by Ofcom (2019) suggests that for some children, a "YouTuber's" personality can be more of a motivation to watch a video than the content itself (p32). Again, this suggests an area where more research would be useful, specifically on how children's perceptions of an influencer/digital content creators (source) may also influence their attitudes towards brands and products when they are promoted in this way. Despite the various studies reviewed here, it is not yet known exactly why certain influencers are more popular with children than others. However, what does seem to be apparent is that the characteristics relating to the source of a commercially motivated message may play a role in persuasion and are therefore worthy of consideration.

As noted throughout this thesis, there are a number of inconsistencies with the way advertising literacy is conceptualised (Young, 1990), as well as a confusion surrounding the

definition of advertising as a construct (Dahlen and Rosengren, 2016). As noted at the beginning of this section, there is a strong case for broadening the scope of advertising definitions to include a broader range of communications channels and techniques in light of the evolution in advertising tactics over the last 30 years (Hackley and Hackley, 2020).

2.3.7 Defining Features of Contemporary Advertising

It is interesting to note how this is reflected in the literature relating to newer forms of marketing communications. For example, there are overlaps between the terms “digital”, “native” and “embedded advertising” (van Reijmersdal and Rozendaal, 2020) “digital advertising formats” (Loose et al., 2023, p74), ‘offline’ and ‘online’ advertising (De Jans, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2020) ‘material’ and ‘content’ (Lampert, Schulze and Dreyer, 2021) and “implicit and explicit” advertising (De Pauw et al., 2018; Hackley and Hackley, 2020). A large body of literature relates to “influencer marketing” (Boerman and van Reijmersdal, 2020) which fundamentally is studied in terms of advertising, despite its name. Indeed, many studies refer to covert ‘marketing’ techniques to cover ‘sponsored content’, embedded and native advertising (Boerman, van Reijmersdal and Neijens, 2015; De Jans et al., 2018; van Reijmersdal and van Dam, 2020).

Hence, it is useful to try and make sense of the defining features of these formats, which for the purposes of this PhD research are all considered to be forms of advertising based on the conceptualisation introduced earlier;

“All forms of commercially-motivated communication that intend to promote brands, products and services to a target audience”

A distinction can be made between objective and subjective context characteristics of media content (De Pelsmacker et al., 2002; Moorman et al., 2002). Objective context characteristics are inherent in the advertising format and are generally perceived in the same way by the audience. For example, the congruence between context and the advertising embedded within it (van Reijmersdal, Smit and Neijens, 2010). Whereas subjective context characteristics are not perceived uniformly as these are the subjective responses to different types of media content. For example, the gratifications obtained from engaging with the content and the attitudes towards the media format (Van Reijmersdal, Smit and Neijens, 2010).

Therefore, analysing context characteristics in more depth, considering the motives for and gratifications from engagement with media content as well as exploring spillover effects might offer valuable insights in advertising literacy research (Van Reijmersdal, Smit and Neijens, (2010). So far there have been very few studies that have explored the characteristics of contemporary advertising in more depth (Lampert et al., 2021).

As a first step, the main defining features of contemporary advertising have been organised into four categories:

1. Message Characteristics
2. Product Characteristics
3. Source Characteristics
4. Content Characteristics

Table 2.8 Presents a summary of these characteristics, definitions and their theoretical basis.

Table 2.8 Characteristics of Contemporary Advertising

	Characteristic	Definition
Message Characteristics	Rational argument	“Focus on the consumer’s practical, functional, utilitarian need for the product or service and emphasize features of a product/service and/or the benefits or reasons for owning or using a particular brand” (Belch and Belch, 2001, p293)
	Emotional argument	“Focus on the customers’ social and/or psychological needs for purchasing a product or service” (Belch and Belch, 2001, p295)
	Moral argument	“Direct attention to what is right or good” (Bakir et al., 2013, p262)
	Straight sell/factual message	“Relies on a straightforward presentation of information concerning the product or service” (Belch and Belch 2001, p303)
	Scientific/Technical evidence	“Cites technical information, results of scientific or laboratory studies, or endorsements by scientific bodies or agencies to support its advertising claims” (Belch and Belch, 2001, p303)
	Format message	Refers to commercial content that is specifically designed to resemble the editorial content that surrounds it (Buijzen et

	integration	al., 2010)
	Thematic message integration	Refers to the thematic ‘fit’ of persuasive content with the context in which it appears (Buijzen et al., 2010)
	Narrative message integration	Refers to the “semantic or conceptual relevance of a persuasive message within the overall narrative of the surrounding media context” (Buijzen et al., 2010 p428)
Product Characteristics	Newness of the product	“Emphasizes the introduction of a new product” (Kunkel, 1992, p141)
	Performance of the product	“Emphasizes the product’s particular capabilities” (Kunkel, 1992, p141)
	Features of the product	“Emphasizes the products particular features” (Kunkel, 1992, p141)
	Comparison	“Either directly or indirectly naming competitors in an ad and comparing one or more specific attributes” (Belch and Belch, 2001, p202)
	Social approval	“Refers to one’s standing with a group of people” (Bakir et al., 2013, p262)
	Self-enhancement	“Refers to the personal benefit the individual might realize from use of the product” (Bakir et al., 2013, p262)
	Social context	“Refers to the social situations surrounding the product use more than the product itself” (Kunkel, 1992, p141)
	Brand prominence	“The extent to which the appearance of the brand possesses characteristics designed to make the central focus of audience attention” (Gupta and Lord, 1998, p48)
Source characteristics	Personality symbol	“Involves a central character or personality symbol that can deliver the advertising message and with which the product or service can be identified” (Belch and Belch, 2001, p306)
	Attractiveness	(Ohanian, 1990)
	Passionate authenticity	“Refers to the notion that authentic people or brands are those that are intrinsically motivated rather than extrinsically motivated” (i.e. marketing for oneself rather than commercial gain) (Audrezet, de Kerviler, and Moulard, 2020, p565)
	Transparent authenticity	“Refers to providing fact-based information about the product or service at the center of the brand partnership. Also entails disclosing information about the contractual terms of the partnership with the particular brand, as well as [sharing] unedited content.” (Audrezet et al., 2020, p565)
	Expertise	Refers to the source’s perceived level of expertise on a specific topic comprising competence, training, education, authority and qualification (Ohanian, 1990)

	Similarity/Congruence	Refers to the level of similarity between the source and the audience in terms of shared interests and activities (De Vierman, Hudders and Nelson, 2019)
	Familiarity	Evidenced by the sharing of highly personal information and interaction with followers, shaping the opinion that the influencer is a peer (De Vierman, Hudders and Nelson, 2019)
	Trustworthiness	Refers to “the degree of confidence in, and the level of acceptance of, the speaker and the message” (Ohanian, 1990 p41)
Content Characteristics	Demonstration	“Designed to illustrate the key advantages of the product/service by showing it in actual use or in some staged situation” (Belch and Belch, 2001 p303)
	Animation	“Animated scenes are drawn by artists or created on [a] computer, and cartoons, puppets or types of fictional characters may be used with this technique” (Belch and Belch, 2001 p305)
	Humour	“Intends to induce laughter or amusement; attracts attention; generates curiosity” (Belch and Belch, 2001 p206)
	Testimonial	“Involves praising the product or service on the basis of his or her personal experience with it” (Belch and Belch, 2001 p304)
	Fantasy	“Any execution element in the ad (audio/visual), which is aimed to psychologically cause the viewer to imagine another world, such as having the product come alive and the use of animation or superheroes.” May also include magic or alternate realities (Rose, Merchant and Bakir, 2012, p77)
	Slice of life/Dramatisation	“Based on a problem/solution approach by portraying a situation that consumers might face in their daily lives” Some excitement in telling the story might also be added (Belch and Belch, 2001, p306)
	Adventure	“To venture upon; undertake or try something new” (Bakir et al., 2013, p262)
	Fun	“Associates positive affect with the products use by having joy and cheer” (Bakir et al., 2013, p262)
	Happiness	“Associates positive effect with the products’ use by smiling, laughing, dancing etc.” (Bakir et al., 2013, p262)
	Pleasure	“Emphasises the satisfaction one gains through use or purchase of the product” (Bakir et al., 2013, p262)
Fear	“Focus on the emotional response to a threat that expresses, or at least implies, some sort of danger (i.e. physical danger, disapproval or social rejection)” (Belch and Belch 2001)	

(Source: Ohanian, 1990; Kunkel, 1992; Belch and Belch, 2001; Buijzen et al., 2010; Bakir et al., 2013; De Vierman et al., 2019; Audrezet et al., 2020).

It is also acknowledged that there are fundamental differences with contemporary advertising formats compared to traditional formats which are briefly summarised based on the literature reviewed so far in Table 2.9.

Table 2.9 Defining Features of Contemporary Advertising Formats

Defining Feature	Examples
Interactivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advergames • In-game advertising • TikTok Advertising • Branded Lenses/Filters on Social Media • Influencer Marketing (reposting/sharing of content)
Long Duration of Exposure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YouTube videos • Social Media • In-game Brand Placement
Implicit Commercial Intent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Native advertising • Sponsored content (social media posts, YouTube videos)
Uses and Gratifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entertainment • Information-Seeking • Social Connection

(Source: Author’s own work).

Hence, the first question proposed in this PhD research is:

RQ1: What are children’s perceptions of contemporary advertising formats?

This question has been developed to enable an exploration of the characteristics of contemporary advertising in more detail. This question primarily seeks to address the imbalance in previous research, which has mainly focused on the individual processes underlying children’s recognition of, and their understanding of the *purpose* of commercial material (De Jans, Van De Sompel, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2017) rather than their perceptions of commercial material itself.

2.3.8 Mere Exposure Effects of Advertising

The concept of mere exposure effects has also been applied in advertising research (Yagi and Inoue, 2018). Essentially, this stream of research builds on an idea originally described by Zajonc (1968, p1), that “mere...exposure to a stimulus is sufficient for [an] enhancement in attitude towards it”. In other words, simply being exposed to an advertisement can influence

consumers' attitudes towards the advertisement and their attitudes toward the brand featured within it (Grimes, 2008). Taking that into consideration, it is reasonable to postulate that the principles of mere exposure effects may be useful when researching embedded advertising formats that do not trigger recognition, but that work on an affective level based on consumers' prior exposure to an advertised brand or product (Grimes, 2008). However, it seems that mere exposure effects have rarely been considered in contemporary advertising literacy research. Perhaps this is because researchers have preferred to draw upon research on decision making from psychology such as low involvement processing theory (Heath, 2000). Low involvement processing theory (LIP) has typically been used to explain the influence of advertising in low involvement conditions and advertising formats that typically require less processing and receive less attention from consumers (Heath, 2000). However, Grimes (2008) draws parallels between the literature relating to LIP and mere exposure effects highlighting the similarities between the two.

Furthermore, parallels can also be drawn between these streams of research and other dual processing theories. Again, this is indicative of the fragmented nature of advertising research that exists within the discipline Faber as noted earlier in this Chapter (Kerr and Schultz, 2010; Faber 2015).

2.4 Sociological Perspectives on Children’s Consumption: An Alternative Approach to Advertising Literacy?

Having reflected on the literature so far, it is clear that it is not sufficient to simply identify crossovers, gaps and criticisms of current advertising literacy theories in order to make an original contribution to knowledge. According to Clarke and Svanaes, (2012, p13) it is necessary for researchers to “continually revisit” the dominant cognitive and consumer socialisation approaches to advertising literacy and persuasion knowledge, which is the aim of this thesis. Valkenburg and Piotrowski, (2017, p3) suggest that one way to advance understanding is to adopt “an interdisciplinary approach integrating knowledge and theories from several disciplines”. Therefore, as outlined in the introductory Chapter, this thesis adopts an interdisciplinary approach drawing upon sociological research, Consumer Culture Theory and the new childhood studies paradigm as a way of addressing some of the theoretical shortcomings discussed in this Chapter so far.

As such, the second research question posed in this thesis is:

RQ2: What can a sociological perspective on consumption reveal about the nature of children’s advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment?

Consumption research in itself is interdisciplinary, encompassing areas such as anthropology, cultural studies, history, sociology, and economics (Sparrman et al., 2012). In addition, it must be acknowledged that advertising;

“is not just a business expenditure undertaken in the hope of moving some merchandise off the store shelves but it is rather an integral part of modern culture. Its creations appropriate and transform a vast range of symbols and ideas; its unsurpassed communicative powers recycle cultural models and references back through the networks of social interactions” (Leiss et al., 2018, p389).

Of most interest here is how advertising literacy theory can be enhanced by incorporating some of the concepts from consumption research and new childhood studies.

2.4.1. New Childhood Studies

New childhood studies is an emergent paradigm rather than a complete set of established theories (Prout and James, 1997), but the key principles of this perspective are outlined below in Table 2.10.

Table 2.10 Key Principles of the New Childhood Studies Paradigm

Principle	How is this relevant to this PhD research?
Childhood is understood as a social construction. Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies.	It provides an interpretive frame for contextualising the early years of human life.
Childhood is a variable of social analysis. It can never be entirely divorced from other variables such as class, gender, or ethnicity.	Comparative and cross-cultural analysis reveals a variety of childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon.
Children’s social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults.	Avoid comparison to ‘adult’ standards of competency.
Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live.	Recognise that children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes.
Ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for the study of childhood. It allows children a more direct voice and participation in the production of sociological data than is usually possible through experimental or survey styles of research.	Consider the justifications for using ethnography as a method and emphasise the importance in facilitating an active role for children in research and representing their voices.
Childhood is a phenomenon in relation to which the double hermeneutic of the social sciences is acutely present (Giddens, 1976).	That is to say, to proclaim a new paradigm of childhood in sociology is also to engage in and respond to the process of reconstructing childhood in society.

(Source: Prout and James, 1997, p8).

2.4.2 Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)

In considering the principles set out in Table 2.4, Consumer Culture Theory is relevant to this PhD research. Defined by Arnould and Thompson (2005, p868) not as a singular theory but rather “a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings”. At its core, Consumer Culture Theory is concerned with the study of consumption situations rather than single variables, therefore attention to context is key (Levy, 2015). The pervasiveness of consumer culture has led to an environment where commercially motivated messages are an integral part of everyday life (Malmelin, 2010). Consumer Culture Theory appreciates that commodities

possess a dual nature (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979), in that they can serve as both objects and social symbols, not just the tangible result of an exchange of value.

As Kline (1993, p7) explains:

“Goods... locate daily acts of consumption within the continuities of personal and family history, group and national styles... [and] the wayward quest for knowing oneself.”

2.4.3 Consumption is Social

The benefit in drawing on sociological research is that one can take a more holistic view of children’s advertising literacy, a view that encompasses the idea that consumption is inherently social (Schor, 2005). As Kline (1993, p42) asserts:

“to understand and criticise marketing’s impact we must assess the cultural forms of consumption and the narratives advertising produces, which situate and explain the role of goods in our everyday lives”.

2.4.3.1 Situated Child Consumption

Specifically, this PhD research incorporates the concept of situated child consumption (Sparrman et al., 2012) from the field of new childhood studies. The concept is based on the assumptions that childhood is both socially constructed and deconstructed for and by children themselves (Prout and James, 1997, p7) and that consumers are also socially and culturally situated (O’Donohoe and Tynan 1998).

Situated child consumption is a socio-contextual approach to studying childhood consumption, in the sense that “consumption represents a principle mechanism through which individualisation is expressed...by the social network...influences that might shape children’s everyday lives” (Martens et al., 2004, p157). Indeed, in the days before the Internet, Lindlof, Shatzer and Wilkinson (1988) described how television viewing led to the creation of interpretive communities that interact around and through the sharing of content.

As it has already been noted, there are many similarities between watching television and watching videos online (Stokel-Walker, 2019) and the way that advertising is presented on both mediums (Vanwesenbeeck, Hudders and Ponnet, 2020). However, it is also possible to draw parallels between the communities that are created from television viewing and those that emerge from using social media. For example, the ‘visco girl’ is a subculture popular amongst teenagers who use the photography application VSCO (Harper, 2019). The visco

girl identity is constructed and characterised by particular fashion choices, such as wearing “scrunchies” and oversized “beachy” clothing and by the ownership of certain products such as metal water bottles or hydro-flasks (Harper, 2019; Ritschel 2020 n.p). Here, the consumption of certain brands, e.g. Starbucks coffee is associated with a particular aesthetic (Ritschel, 2020). Interestingly, the ‘visco girl’ subculture extends beyond the acquisition of brands to certain pro-social behaviours too, such as environmental activism (e.g. Save The Turtles), which is also common in those who self-identify with the term (Harper, 2019; Ritschel, 2020).

2.4.3.2 Consumer Tribes

It is possible to describe the ‘visco girl’ identity as an example of a consumer tribe defined by Cova and Cova, (2002) as a group that comprises members who share experiences, emotions and a collective identity who may engage in collective social action that can be facilitated through the consumption of brands, products, and services. Consumer tribes are playful and transient (Goulding, Shankar and Canniford, 2013). It is true that there are conceptual differences between the definitions of consumer subcultures, consumer tribes and brand communities, however what is most relevant in terms of this thesis is the overarching viewpoint of Consumer Culture Theory, which is that consumers do not act in isolation (Goulding, Shankar and Canniford, 2013). According to Mitchell and Imrie, (2011, p40) it is possible “to link social context with consumption to understand “real” consumers”.

As Goulding, Shankar and Canniford, (2013, p814) assert, “the cognitive perspective [of consumption] advocates a very individual centred view that emphasises the psychological processes of sorting, encoding and remembering information”. Furthermore, it fails to appreciate “the part played by things acquired in the marketplace” which drastically narrows understanding of children’s cultural experiences (Kline, 1993, p14). Whereas the tribal view appreciates that social associations are the most important influence on an individual’s consumption decisions (Mitchell and Imrie, 2011). In the ‘visco girl’ scenario, it is the subculture of a certain group of customers, rather than any specific marketing efforts, driving the desire for specific, meaningful products, which is an interesting notion worthy of further exploration. In this example, it is possible to see how exploring a socio-contextual approach to children’s interactions with marketing and their peer-to-peer textual practices, might shed light on how the symbolic meanings and ownership of certain brands creates a sense of belonging for children and fulfils a desire to fit in with a certain social group both online and

in real life (Martens et al., 2004) factors which have been shown to be important to children in previous advertising studies (Lawlor et al, 2016; Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008; Achereiner and John, 2003).

Within digital literacy research from the field of education, scholars have demonstrated the value in applying this concept as a lens through which children's interactions with a variety of contemporary media formats such as virtual online worlds (Marsh, 2010; 2011) and video content on YouTube can be explored (Marsh, 2015). Despite this, hardly any studies have attempted to apply Consumer Culture Theory or its related concepts as an alternative lens to developmentalism in children's advertising research with participants under the age of 12. Some of the first to do so, Nairn, Griffin and Wicks (2008) explored children's use of brand symbolism by drawing upon Consumer Culture Theory. They found that brands and their associations "play an important role in children's everyday social networks and cultural practice" (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, (2008, p638) supporting earlier work by Schor (2005). As Schor, (2005, p189) observes:

"Kids bond to brands, have adopted cool as a paramount value and don't seem to mind that their favourite musical groups are pure marketing creations. They flock to websites that are mostly advertising and they cover their bodies with logos"

Lawlor et al., (2016) also validated that brand associations online can serve as a form of self-expression and as a way of presenting a socially acceptable image online. To the researcher's best knowledge, these concepts have not yet been applied elsewhere in children's advertising literacy research.

2.4.4 Parallels between Children's Advertising Research and Children's Consumption Research

Interestingly, as it is evidently the case within the marketing discipline, childhood consumption research in sociology has also been influenced by the "[e]ver present and powerful (if sometimes invisible) universalistic claims of developmental psychology," Sparrman et al., (2012, p10) "which has provided a framework of explanation of the child's nature and indeed justified the concept of the naturalness of childhood itself." (Prout and James, 1997, p9). In addition, the influence of the consumer socialisation paradigm as outlined earlier in Sections 2.2.1.3 and 2.2.1.7 is also evident in childhood consumption research, where studies have also focused on when children can realistically understand

consumption and how they are “born non-consumers only to be fully socialised by the time they reach adulthood” (Sparrman et al., 2012, p11).

Advocates of consumer socialisation acknowledge that the process of learning to consume, developing marketplace knowledge and indeed the interpretation of marketing rely on more than children’s age-related cognitive ability. Yet critics argue that as a paradigm, it still carries the embedded assumption that there is “more or less a single, narrowly defined, trajectory” from non-consumer to competent consumer (Cook, 2008, p230). The dominant, “universalistic” view of childhood socialisation based on developmental psychology (Sparrman, Sandin and Sjöberg, 2012, p10) is considered to be problematic by some researchers because it also reinforces the idea that all children are in some way incomplete or underdeveloped until they can demonstrate a high level of information-processing abilities comparable to those of adults (Cook, 2014). Consumer socialisation is generally presented as “a transactional negotiation that occurs when individuals strive to become group members” yet begins from the baseline of adult interactional competence (James, Jenks and Prout, 2009, p25). Yet few studies actually make direct comparisons between adults and children’s understanding of advertising (Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005). As James, Jenks and Prout (2009, p27) observe “[c]hildhoods are variable and intentional. In direct refutation of the pre-sociological [i.e. cognitive] models of childhood, there is no universal ‘child’ with which to engage.”

As a result, some sociologists describe consumer socialisation theory as “teleological”, (Cook 2008, p230) in the sense that it “posits children as incomplete, less-than-knowledgeable beings whose movement is toward an assumed or desired state of being or knowing” (p233). Developmentalism as an overarching school of thought is considered to hold a narrow view of “the child” that ultimately leads to similarly constrained views of “the market” and ultimately “what constitutes consumption” (Cook, 2014, p64). This is an important point to highlight here because despite some scholars’ increasing dissatisfaction with the consumer socialisation paradigm as a whole, John’s (1999) work in particular is still used as a common theoretical basis in marketing research with children. This is most likely because it offers a ready-made, tried-and-tested framework for research. However, as Nairn, Griffin and Wicks (2008, p628) argue, the psychological approach “cannot shed much light on the meanings and uses of specific brands for children in relation to the social and cultural contexts of their everyday lives”.

Furthermore, children learn about the marketplace and what it means to be a consumer through the media on television and in films (Nelson and McLeod, 2005) and also, as is argued in this thesis, through the use of new media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube and through interaction with the metaverse (e.g. in social games). Therefore, the media's role in the consumer socialisation process may also be an increasingly important factor in shaping children's consumer behaviour and attitudes (Kline, 1993; Nelson and McLeod, 2005) as both traditional and digital media become more enmeshed with commercial content and exposure and consumption increases in young people (Rideout et al., 2010; van Reijmersdal and Van Dam, 2020; Ofcom, 2022).

2.4.5 Exploring the Idea of Literacy as a Practice

The key to understanding the concept of situated child consumption is to first understand the relationship between consumption and practice (Martens et al., 2004) and also how consumption is enacted in practice (Sparrman et al., 2012). Burnett et al., (2014, p90) agree that literacy can be viewed as a practice, i.e. as more than just "a set of skills" regardless of specific context (e.g. new media). Importantly, communicative practices are multimodal in nature, in other words, children create meaning through various "modalities" (Gee, 2003) and semiotic resources (Kress, 1997) for example through images, text, symbols and interactions (Vasquez, 2005). This is in line with the term 'consumer culture' itself, which also conceptualises an "interconnected system of commercially produced images, texts and objects that groups use... to make collective sense of their environments and to orient their members' experiences and lives" (Kozinets, 2001, p68).

By applying this concept in this thesis,

"it is possible to bridge the gaps between the study of [children's] everyday life and the politics and policy of consumption and childhood. If [child] consumption is situated, then it can never be reduced to being a question of age... or any other lone entity but must always be a mixture of different aspects." (Sparrman et al., 2012, p18).

Based on the theoretical shortcomings of cognitive developmental approaches to advertising literacy and persuasion knowledge noted which are noted at the end of this Chapter, it is this notion of "different aspects" (Sparrman et al., 2012, p18) that is considered to be important in this thesis. As Kline (1993) observes, many commodities are either cultural products or have a social value related to their ownership and use. Arguably, if this was the case 30 years ago

before the advent of the Internet, then it could be expected that the majority of commodities exchanged in today's contemporary marketplace are now of a cultural nature.

As Marsh (2015, p4) states;

“viewing consumption as ontological enactment with (im)material, fractal artefacts and brands enables us to broaden the focus of consumption so that we can begin to trace other elements that are significant in this process...”

In other words, exploring children's practices, which in the case of this thesis relates to the way that they interact and interpret advertising in the contemporary media environment may allow researchers to “question established consumer theories” (Sparrman et al., 2012, p14) such as those based on developmentalism.

Furthermore, it could be possible to demonstrate how children's advertising 'literacy' can be understood as something that is lived by children through their concrete practices and daily interactions (Rockhill, 1987). For example, Ritson and Elliott (1995) propose a model incorporating 'practice' and 'event' accounts of advertising literacy which resonate with previous literature on the meanings of advertisements (McCracken, 1987; O'Donohoe, 1994). Literacy practices concern the concrete skills and purposes surrounding the 'reading' or making sense of advertisements (Mitchell, Macklin and Paxman, 2007). Literacy events are the social interactions facilitated by those readings, and the ways that these interactions are used to construct self and group identities (Ritson and Elliot, 1995). These two interdependent processes account for the creative negotiations, or co-creation, of advertising meanings constantly undertaken by consumers (Ritson and Elliot, 1995).

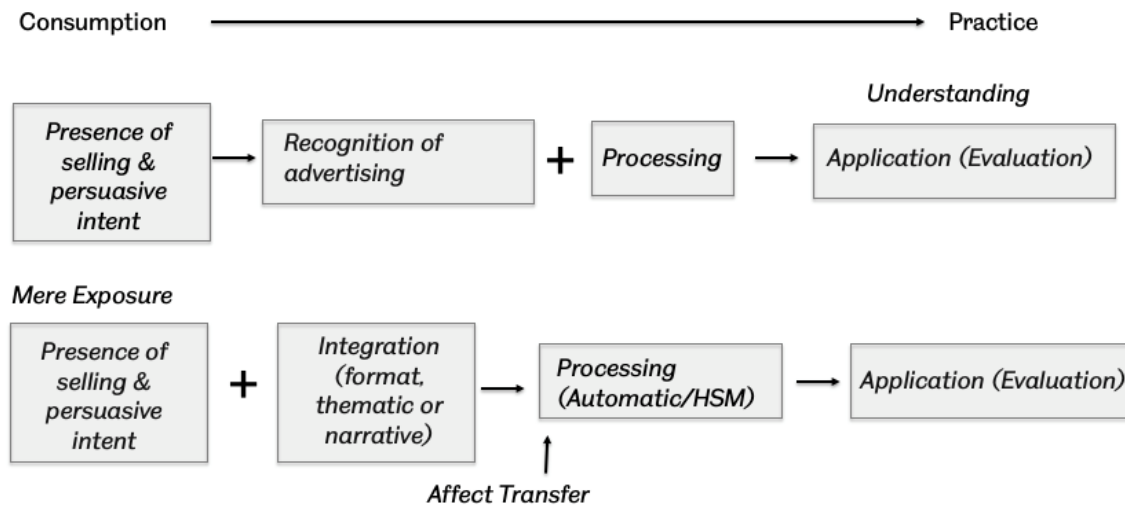
In bringing all of these insights together, children's advertising literacy is positioned in this thesis as a multimodal and immaterial practice (Marsh, 2014; Gee, 2003; Burnett et al., 2014) which forms the basis of the third and final question to be addressed in this research:

RQ3: How is children's advertising literacy enacted in practice?

This question seeks to explore the concept of Situational Advertising Literacy introduced by Hudders et al., (2017) in the context of the contemporary media environment, where many forms of advertising are deliberately designed to blend in with the surrounding environment. This PhD research questions the assumption that Dispositional Advertising Literacy is a necessary prerequisite to Situational Advertising Literacy by exploring if children can

demonstrate Situational Advertising Literacy in the absence of activation of their Dispositional Advertising Literacy? This is illustrated in Figure 2.4 below.

Figure 2.4 Advertising Literacy as a Practice



Research on how situational factors influence children’s ability to critically evaluate advertisements is limited. However, a study of adults conducted by Rozendaal et al., (2010) revealed that people were generally more sceptical of advertisements that were embedded in entertainment content than advertisements that were embedded in educational content, suggesting that people can adapt the application of their advertising literacy according to the immediate context in which an advertisement is seen.

This research question also aims to further explore the evaluative dimension of children’s advertising literacy, by drawing upon children’s consumption research to discover the *nature* of the contemporary media environment. To do so, it is necessary to take a deeper look at the contemporary advertising formats identified in the previous section (2.2). This is achieved in this research by exploring children’s own perspectives of the diverse properties of digital platforms including the “agentic and communal roles” expressed when interacting with others within those spaces (Hoffman and Novak, 2017, p1195) and the way that these are interwoven with children’s physical, social and virtual networks.

It may also be possible to build upon the OBC Literacy Framework (Lawlor et al., 2016) in this PhD research. For instance, by further exploring the capacity for consumers (including

children) to act as sources and agents of advertising messages and the significance of earned media (i.e. electronic word of mouth) in terms of peer-to-peer communication.

This PhD research also incorporates elements of the PCMC Model (Buijzen et al., 2010) by considering the level of integration between the commercialised media content and the surrounding media (Buijzen et al., 2010) and the impact of cognitive load and distraction on the way that persuasion is processed.

It is reasonable to argue that if consumption is embedded within children's behaviour and relationships (Cook, 2004b; 2008; Sparrman et al., 2012) then by extension, so is the consumption of contemporary advertising formats. Conceptualising advertising literacy in terms of practice may enhance current conceptualisations of Situational advertising literacy by considering socio-contextual aspects of children's lives that have been neglected in advertising literacy research, such as their relationships with their friends and peers (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008).

2.4.6 Peer Influence

In some respects, there are similarities between belonging to a consumer 'tribe' as mentioned previously, and the importance of fitting in with peers on young people's consumer behaviour. Peers have long been recognised as being a key influence on children (Moschis and Churchill, 1978; Su and Tong, 2020) and their friendships play an important role in their lives (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012). Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel, (1989, p474) state that susceptibility to peer influence can be defined as:

“the need to identify or enhance one's image with significant others through the acquisition and use of products and brands, the willingness to conform to the expectations of others regarding purchase decisions (normative influence), and/or the tendency to learn about products and brands by observing others and/or seeking information from others (informational influence)”.

Essentially, this definition posits that peer influence has two dimensions; normative and informational. Despite being thirty years old, this definition of peer influence can still be considered valid in today's society because fundamentally children's interactions within their peer groups have remained the same. For example, children still consider each other's preferences when making purchase decisions (Meyer and Anderson, 2000) and brand affiliations play an important role in ensuring children 'fit in' with others through the possession of peer-approved brands or products (Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel, 1989; Gunter and Furnham, 1998; Schor, 2005; Jones and Glynn, 2019) (i.e. normative influence).

The concept of “fitting in” is especially important to older children, particularly as they mature into teenagers (Leslie, Levine, Loughlin and Pechmann, 2005; Banerjee and Dittmar, 2008). In addition, children still share information about brands with their friends, and social interactions within peer groups allow children to learn about different brands (Jones and Glynn, 2019) (i.e. informational influence). As Schor (2005, p77) explains: “word of mouth from friends is one of the major sources of credibility in a world that is over-saturated by commercial messages”.

Susceptibility to peer influence is also related to scepticism towards the motives and claims made by advertisers (Boush, Friestad and Rose, 1994; Mangleburg and Bristol, 1998). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that children may trust recommendations for products, make-up or toys that come from their peers more than ones that come from companies, because they may assume these are genuine (De Jans et al., 2018) as opposed to commercially motivated. What has changed, fundamentally, is the way in which children interact with their peers. For example, in the UK almost three quarters of children aged 8-12 years own a mobile phone and as such it is much easier for them to communicate with their peers in today's society (Ofcom, 2022) than it was thirty years ago. Therefore, one could argue that the explosion of social media channels and online communities has increased both the opportunities for socialising with peers, and also the level of brand-related information that children are exposed to, information that is often shared and endorsed by their own peers (Lawlor et al., 2016). Hence, these developments may have increased the importance of the role that peers play in influencing each other's attitudes towards brands, product preferences and consumption behaviours.

2.4.6.1 The Links between Marketing, Peer Influence and Children's Consumption

Tweens are highly sensitive to peer pressure (Smith, Chein and Steinburg, 2014) and as Schor, (2005, p65) suggests, marketers' consistent encouragement of “age-inappropriate behaviour and desires can create confusion and erode genuine self-esteem” in children who feel the need to conform to social norms and trends to fit in with their friends.

Remarkably however, very few marketing studies have made the link between peer influence and the effects of marketing on children (Rozendaal, Slot, van Reijmersdal and Buijzen, 2013). Of the few that have, Rozendaal et al., (2013) examined the extent to which children (aged 9-12 years) are influenced by their peers' preferences for certain brands in the context of social games. Findings indicated that peer groups set “normative standards over what

brands are cool and popular” even within a virtual environment (Rozendaal et al., 2013, p151) which is in line with Bearden et al.’s, (1989) original conceptualisation of normative peer influence, despite the digital context. The suggestion that children use their peers’ behaviour as justification for their own requests, also supports early research (e.g. Ward, 1974) and further emphasises a need for more insights into “the nature and role of other dimensions of peer influence in commercial social media” (Rozendaal et al., 2013, p152).

2.4.6.2 The Links between Marketing, Peer Influence and Advertising Literacy

Few studies have examined the link between peer influence and children’s advertising literacy. However, recent research by De Pauw, Cauberghe and Hudders, (2018) found that children’s advertising literacy is substantially influenced by socio-contextual factors, particularly their peers. For example, in their study, children were more sceptical of advertisements if the majority of their classmates shared this attitude. Yet it is important to note that this study was conducted in a classroom environment, therefore more research is required to explore the extent to which peers have an influence on children’s advertising literacy in other consumption contexts where they are making their own purchase decisions, such as in retail environments (e.g. supermarkets) and in virtual environments. As De Pauw et al., (2018, p18) acknowledge, more research into peer influence would be beneficial to “reveal [the] underlying processes” and characteristics that render some peers more influential than others.

On this point, more research here may also be beneficial in understanding more about the appeal of social media influencers, especially the influencers that children relate to and develop a connection or Parasocial relationship with (Van Dam and van Reijmersdal, 2019). As argued throughout this section, there are potential benefits from drawing upon sociology, where previous research has explored the opportunities for children to consume content that is produced by other children in virtual environments and communities (Dowdall, 2009; Marsh, 2016).

2.5 Where are there Gaps in Advertising Literacy Knowledge?

2.5.1 Gap 1: Lack of Research on Children’s Understanding of Contemporary Advertising Formats

As modes and methods of communication have evolved, the advertising literacy theories that have been developed from studies into what could be considered to be ‘simpler’ advertising formats are becoming increasingly contested within the academic community (Nelson, 2018; Lapierre, 2019). Simpler formats are understood to be easier to recognise, so theories based entirely on traditional advertising formats may not be as relevant in explaining children’s understanding of contemporary advertising in today’s digital society, which by its nature is much harder to recognise (Panic et al., 2013; Lawlor et al., 2016; De Jans et al., 2017; Lapierre et al., 2017; Nelson, 2018).

As is emphasised in Section 2.3, contemporary advertising formats are personalised, complex, and highly immersive (Lampert, Schulze and Dreyer, 2021; Castonguay and Messina, 2022b) and potentially harder for children to recognise than more traditional methods. Indeed, as Panic et al., (2013, p 271) state: “the affect-based nature of contemporary advertising demands a radical revision of our conceptualisation of ‘fair’ marketing to children”. Hence, scholars continue to call for more research into children’s exposure to newer forms of marketing as they arise (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012; Panic et al., 2013; Lawlor, et al., 2016; De Jans et al., 2017; Nelson, 2019; Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2023) and for research that explores how children interact with digital marketing formats that are “fundamentally different” from traditional methods (Buijzen et al., 2010, p427). However, the pace of change within the contemporary media environment means that research into such digital methods can become outdated rather quickly (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012). This presents a real challenge for academic research (Buijzen et al., 2010; Clarke and Svanaes, 2012; Verhellen et al., 2014; van Reijmersdal and Rozendaal, 2020) and as a result;

“[p]olicymakers, parents, educators and brand marketers lack empirical evidence about how children might use social media platforms to engage with commercial content in the online marketplace” (Jones and Glynn, 2019, p92).

The increasing convergence of traditional and digital media means that the marketing industry has had to adapt to cope with “disruptive technologies, shorter product lifestyles and rapidly changing trends,” (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2017, p41). However,

theoretically, online and offline marketing still “coexist with interchanging roles across the customer path” (Kotler et al., 2017, p41) and evidence suggests that the “synergistic cross-effects” from an integrated approach to marketing communications are more successful at engaging consumers (Batra and Keller 2016, p136). What this means in the context of marketing to children, is that it is necessary for researchers to examine the format and context of marketing materials and “the integrated and interactive nature of the commercial messages in them” (Oates, Watkins and Thyne 2016, p1970). This can be achieved by exploring children’s “responses, understanding and engagement with [marketing] material” within a real-world environment (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012, p28).

RQ1: What are children’s perceptions of contemporary advertising formats?

This question has been developed to enable an exploration of the characteristics of contemporary advertising in more detail. This question primarily seeks to address the imbalance in previous research, which has mainly focused on the individual processes underlying children’s recognition of, and their understanding of the *purpose* of commercial material (De Jans, Van De Sompel, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2017) rather than their perceptions of commercial material itself.

This focus of RQ1 is justified by arguments put forward in previous interpretivist research studies, such as Lawlor and Prothero’s (2008) assertion that advertising literacy needs more than just the cognitive skills that required to recognise selling and persuasive intent, and that true advertising literacy develops when “children appreciate the use of advertising techniques, strategies, and production values” that are involved in commercial persuasion (Lawlor and Prothero, 2008, p1206). Similarly, Nelson (2016), suggests that researchers should at least ask children about their interpretations of advertising, which can be enriched further by enabling children to create their own advertising materials “within the scope of their everyday lives” (Nelson, 2016, p171) and based discussions around these. This approach may give a better indication of children’s level of understanding compared to cognitive or recognition-based questions only (Nelson, 2016).

This research question directly responds to calls for contemporary advertising formats to be scrutinised more closely by researchers and advertising policy makers alike (Nairn and Fine, 2008; Lampert et al., 2021), both in light of the fundamental differences between traditional

and contemporary advertising (Buijzen et al., 2010) and the increasing integration of commercially motivated communications within non-commercial contexts, such as entertainment (Oates et al., 2016) In doing so, this research has implications for future researchers in terms of identifying the characteristics by which advertisements may be evaluated morally and affectively.

2.5.2 Gap 2: Lack of Holistic Research on Children’s Advertising Literacy

However, research that explores children’s understanding of marketing materials more holistically, that is from more than just a cognitive developmental competency or age-related perspective, is largely absent from marketing research (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008). The focus of much advertising literacy research has been on the cognitive abilities of the individual child, yet there are some of the potential shortcomings of these theories (Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005 and Rozendaal, Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2010). At present, it is unclear whether children’s advertising literacy and their ability to navigate the marketplace as consumers is entirely a by-product of age or developmental stage (John, 1999; Kunkel, 2010) or whether it is influenced by other factors such as media format and/or content, or socio-contextual influences such as peers and/or family environment (i.e. socio-economic groups, presence of siblings etc.) Arguably, all of these factors have the potential to affect how well a child can recognise the selling and persuasive intent of marketing material, how they interpret it and the extent to which they are influenced by it (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks 2008; Nairn and Spotswood, 2015; De Jans et al., 2017; De Pauw et al., 2019), which suggests the need for an alternative perspective.

The validity of ‘ages and stages’ theories of advertising literacy (John, 1999) based purely on children’s cognitive abilities have been the subject of criticism over the years (Livingstone and Helpser, 2006; Nairn and Fine, 2008; Hudders et al., 2017). According to some critics, these so-called ‘cognitive’ theories of children’s advertising literacy place too much emphasis on chronological age. As Archard (1993, p66) notes “children arguably possess some crucial competencies long before Piaget says they do”. As such, scholars have continued to challenge the notion of using age as a proxy for maturation in terms of how children develop advertising literacy (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008; Nairn and Fine, 2008; Rozendaal, Lapierre, van Reijmersdal and Buijzen, 2011; Nelson, 2018). Indeed, some scholars have argued that much of the literature surrounding age-related expectations of children’s understanding of marketing is inconclusive and as a result, the most realistic summary of

early research on offer is that “children learn important things about advertiser goals and tactics between their toddler years and the time they graduate from high school” (Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005, p222).

Critics of developmentalism argue that this approach fails to consider the importance of social and cultural elements of children’s everyday lives (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008; Rozendaal, Lapierre, van Reijmersdal and Buijzen, 2011), such as how they are able to draw upon experience of persuasion in other contexts; for example, within sibling interactions (McAlister and Cornwell, 2009) or within their peer or friendship groups (De Pauw, et al., 2019). Buckingham (2007) also stresses the importance of considering social context (gender, social class and ethnicity) when exploring commercialisation in children’s lives, yet it seems that many studies continue to use age as the main predictor of children’s competence in understanding advertising, regardless of the format, content or context.

In the interests of conducting research reflexively (Brady and Graham, 2020) it must be acknowledged that whilst this thesis also relies somewhat on certain principles of developmentalism to guide the selection of research participants (see Chapter 3 for a detailed explanation of methodology), this thesis maintains the argument that cognitive models of children’s development may not provide a holistic explanation of the development of children’s ‘literacy’ or understanding in this area, in light of shifts in children’s consumer culture and the evolution of advertising formats as discussed throughout this Chapter.

In contrast, this thesis argues that neglecting to explore the social side of children’s interactions with media and their perceptions of contemporary advertising formats may result in some theoretical shortcomings when it comes to conceptualising their advertising literacy. To illustrate this point, evidence suggests that for very young children (under five), television advertisements are often viewed as just another form of entertainment (Livingstone and Helpser, 2006; Nairn and Dew, 2007). Furthermore, there is also evidence indicating that there are some specific traits within advertising that may help children to recognise it from other content. For example, television advertisements are traditionally much shorter than the entertainment programmes they appear alongside, and young children may actually use this typical characteristic as a way of identifying an advertisement rather than any sophisticated knowledge or recognition of selling or persuasive intent (Oates, Blades and Gunter, 2002).

Therefore, this thesis aims to shift the research focus onto children's interactions with the media environment and explore how these relate to their advertising literacy. As such, the second research question to be addressed in this thesis is:

RQ2: What can a sociological perspective on consumption reveal about the nature of children's advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment?

2.5.3: Gap 3: Lack of Research on the Application of Advertising Literacy in Situ

According to Wyness, (2006, p117) many scholars have based their children's advertising literacy theories on the two dominant theories of "growing up"; developmentalism and consumer socialisation, appearing to agree with the assertion that "these capabilities develop over time, largely as a function of cognitive growth and development rather than the accumulation of any particular amount of experience with media content" (Kunkel, 2010, p110).

Most researchers do not consider the importance of content and format when exploring persuasive tactics with children. However, if it is the case that attitude towards advertising is as important as having knowledge of advertising in reducing susceptibility to persuasion, (Rozendaal et al., 2011) then arguably researchers also need to focus on other factors affecting attitudes towards advertising, for example how much children and young people actually like the content.

Advertising literacy researchers should not ignore the growing evidence that advertising in the contemporary media environment is both immersive and entertaining, making it much harder to discern than traditional advertising (Castonguay and Messina, 2022a). Indeed, one of the strengths of the conceptual model proposed by Hudders et al., (2017) is that it considers the actual retrieval of conceptual knowledge, the context within which persuasion takes place (i.e. Embedded advertising exposure) and the application of such knowledge in situ (Sweeney, Lawlor and Brady, 2021). As shown in Figure 2.1, the model also takes into account 'Attitude towards the ad' and 'Advertising Effects' to counterbalance the automatic affective reactions evoked by the fun and entertaining character of contemporary advertising formats (Hudders et al., 2017).

Whilst a number of studies have examined the affective or attitudinal dimensions of advertising literacy when defining what constitutes a critical attitude towards advertising, the majority of this research has primarily just focused on two negative attitudes; ‘scepticism’ and ‘disliking of advertising’. This appears to be the result of a widely-held perspective that critical evaluations of advertising always equate to an acknowledgement of the negative aspects of advertising as a practice. According to the existing, albeit limited literature, advertising literacy researchers should not ignore the evidence which supports the suggestion that children’s attitudes towards advertising can also be positive in nature. For example, favourable attitudes such as ‘liking of advertising’, can stem from children’s implicit familiarity with the “norms and values of advertising formats” (Hudders et al, 2017, p340).

On the one hand, this insight appears to reflect the fact that today’s children have grown up in the digital world and therefore they have a level of familiarity with contemporary advertising, yet is also somewhat vague and does not offer any insights as to the defining features of advertising formats that may be particularly popular with children. Despite this increasing awareness, few studies have explored children’s attitudes towards and perceptions of content. It is “a pattern so persistent throughout the literature that it has now been exported to studies of Internet advertising to children as well” (Kunkel, 2010, p113). As Nairn and Fine (2008) highlight, both traditional and digital marketing methods attempt to entertain and use emotion to appeal to children, yet this is also an area where insights are lacking (Nicolini, Cassia and Bellotto, 2017; Sanchez-Fernandez and Jimenez-Castillo, 2021). Prior research has shown that attitudinal dimensions are as important as cognitive dimensions of advertising literacy (i.e. possession of conceptual knowledge of advertising) in reducing susceptibility to unwanted advertising effects (Rozendaal et al., 2011). Therefore, researchers also need to focus on the factors that could affect children’s attitudes towards advertising.

In an age of instantaneous, limitless communication, where seamless integration and technological progress has pushed the traditional boundaries between information, entertainment and advertising to the point of extinction, it is plausible to suggest that positive attitudes may also be created and even enhanced by the different characteristics of advertisements. There is support for this idea and some have suggested that research could benefit from exploring the specific advertising features or characteristics that make advertisements entertaining or appealing for children (De Jans et al, 2017; Lampert et al., 2021). For example, the use of semiotics in advertising such as brand characters, (De Jans et

al., 2017) fantasy appeals (Rose et al., 2012) or celebrity endorsers (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012). As Jaakkola (2019, p2) asserts “content that encounters such massive popularity should be taken seriously and included in discussions of media content to better understand what constitutes it.”

It is also plausible to suggest that popular communications may be more effective at persuasion than unpopular ones, regardless of the levels of advertising literacy or persuasion knowledge possessed by children. Hence, existing conceptualisations of advertising literacy that incorporate ‘dislike of advertising’ as a general attitude towards advertising may not be sufficient in explaining how children interpret an advertisement in the contemporary media environment. Positive attitudes may also be influential in persuading children to take a desired action after viewing an advertisement, regardless of its subject matter. Yet, at the time of writing, few studies have offered a comprehensive explanation as to the types of advertisements that children are more likely to like than dislike, and why this might be the case. Thus, it is still unclear which factors have the most influence on the way that children interpret advertising and whether this interpretation differs depending on the format or tactics used (Ahn, 2022).

Recognition alone does not mean that children understand the commercial intent of advertising (Lampert et al., 2021), yet overall, there is a lack of research into the evaluative component of advertising literacy (De Pauw, De Wold, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2018). Current conceptualisations consider morality in terms of appropriateness (Castonguay and Messina, 2022a) therefore there is the potential to expand upon this by also considering children’s positive attitudes towards advertising and how these attitudes manifest as a result of the nature of the media environment and the increasingly blurred boundaries between commercials and entertainment. This is important for understanding how advertising is interpreted, how this might influence children’s attitudes and their consumer behaviour.

Nevertheless, there is some evidence that children have the ability to scrutinise contemporary advertising formats and their tactics (De Pauw, De Wolf, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2018). Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that almost 40 years prior to this study, Robertson and Rossiter (1974) emphasised the importance of symbolism within advertisements and how having actual lived experience of a product can influence the way an advertisement is interpreted, suggesting that there could be more to children’s advertising literacy beyond the

cognitive dimension. Hence, there remains a need for researchers “to more fully explore what advertising means to children” (Lawlor and Prothero, 2002, p495). What this means in the context of marketing to children, is that it is necessary for researchers to examine the format and context of contemporary advertising and “the integrated and interactive nature of the commercial messages in them” (Oates, Watkins and Thyne 2016, p1970).

More research is needed into what constitutes a ‘critical response’ to advertising, including studies that challenge the assumption that there is a direct link between negative attitudes to advertising and decreases in purchase intention. For example, it is currently unclear if children can possess a negative attitude towards advertising in general yet still find some aspects entertaining.

Therefore, there is a need for more research that acknowledges, accommodates and accounts for the numerous impacts that the digital revolution has had, and will continue to have, on advertising tactics and the implications this has for children’s advertising literacy. This can be achieved by exploring children’s “responses, understanding and engagement with [commercial] material” within a real-world environment (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012, p28). Hence the third research question addressed in this thesis is:

RQ3: How is children’s advertising literacy enacted in practice?

2.6 Summary of Literature Review

As mentioned in the introductory Chapter, a better understanding of the impacts of the commercialised media environment on children’s lives should be considered essential by everyone who is involved in promoting the healthy development of children and adolescents (Rideout et al., 2010). From the dual perspectives of advertising and sociology research, this naturally includes the people who have close relationships with children, such as parents, caregivers, and teachers, but it also applies to the “commercial organisations, policy makers and researchers” who have their own vested interests in children’s role within the marketplace (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008, p638).

Academics from across the social sciences tend to be split about whether it is children’s choice or a consequence of commercialisation that drives children’s consumer culture, which has culminated in a shared “moral concern about the intensity of marketing towards children

and ways to combat it, rather than a curiosity about the subject's conceptual and analytical import" (Cook, 2004a, p148). It appears that what originated as legitimate concerns over intrusive, unrealistic and aggressive 'selling' tactics (Phillips, 1997), has since evolved into a complex area of restrictions, guidelines and regulations to protect children from the risks and harms associated with advertisers' increasingly sophisticated, insidious attempts to make profits. This is reflected in much of the research that has been conducted on children's advertising over the last 60 years.

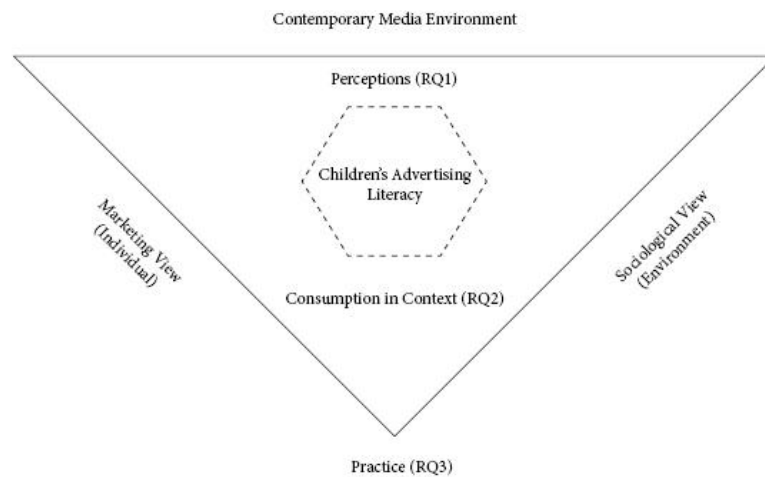
Whilst this PhD research also shares the view that children should always be protected from harmful, deceptive and inappropriate advertising, it also argues that in order to ultimately define what is meant by 'responsible' advertising to children, it is important for researchers to work towards the development of a conceptualisation of advertising literacy that is fit for purpose in the contemporary media environment, where many "persuasion attempts blend seamlessly into everyday discourse" (Freeman and Shapiro, 2014, p35).

As emphasised in Section 2.2, contemporary advertising formats are personalised, complex, and highly immersive and potentially harder for children to recognise than more traditional methods (Lampert, Schulze and Dreyer, 2021; Castonguay and Messina, 2022a). Hence, scholars continue to call for more research into children's exposure to newer forms of advertising as they arise (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012; Panic et al., 2013; Lawlor, et al., 2016; De Jans et al., 2017; Nelson, 2019; Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2023).

Conceptualisations of advertising literacy should also consider the context of persuasion, including the dynamic nature of the contemporary media environment and the implications this has for the retrieval of advertising knowledge and the actual application of advertising literacy in situ. Therefore, it is beneficial to consider the nature of the contemporary media environment in all advertising literary research, not just in the context of children. However, in light of the concerns surrounding the negative effects of advertising on children that have been raised by multiple researchers, policy makers and practitioners over the last four decades, it is important to work towards a conceptualisation of advertising literacy that acknowledges how sophisticated the science of advertising has become as a result of digitalisation, whilst also acknowledging the significant impact this has had on children's everyday lives. Today's children are part of a generation of sophisticated consumers, who

have grown up in a hyper-connected world where commercialisation permeates almost every corner of the physical and virtual spaces that they inhabit.

Figure 2.5 Conceptual Framework



(Source: Author's own work).

2.7 Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework has been developed from this literature review and illustrates the theoretical scope of this PhD project. It represents how two traditionally separate, yet related bodies of literature and thought (i.e. children's marketing theory and children's consumption theory) are incorporated into this PhD study to advance understanding of children's advertising literacy. This framework is a simple illustration but it seeks to draw attention to the contemporary media environment as the overarching context of this research.

It also emphasises the researcher's sincere quest for "getting to know [the] children [in this research]" as suggested by Cook (2008, p235) through the exploration of their own perspectives (as indicated in RQ1). In addition, this framework indicates where the project's research questions are situated in relation to the intersections of the two disciplines (RQ2). Furthermore, this framework highlights the researcher's focus on exploring the actual enactment, or application of advertising literacy in practice (RQ3).

This framework guides this PhD research in the direction of enhancing previous research, which has primarily focused solely on children's possession of 'conceptual' advertising knowledge through measures of recall or recognition of explicit or obvious advertising formats (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Rozendaal, et al., 2011; Hudders et al., 2017; Zarouali et al., 2019; Lapierre, 2019) by also considering how advertising literacy can be applied in the absence of recognition (as illustrated in Figure 2.4 earlier).

The following Chapter; Chapter 3 details the methodological approach adopted in this PhD research.

Chapter 3.0 Methodology

3.1 Introduction to the Chapter

This Chapter provides an overview of the methodological approach taken in this PhD research. To begin, the philosophical assumptions of the researcher are presented in relation to the overall exploratory research strategy and the case for an interdisciplinary approach to the creation of new knowledge is discussed. Next, this Chapter presents a discussion of the various decisions that were involved in the creation of the overall research design as illustrated in Figure 3.1, and provides justification for and an evaluation of, the qualitative data collection methods and analysis techniques that were chosen. In addition, examples of visual materials created by participants during the creative workshops are included in this Chapter to further illustrate the participatory and creative nature of the overall methodology. This Chapter also includes a discussion of the key ethical issues associated with conducting research with children and explains how these were managed throughout the research process.

3.1.1 Research Philosophy

The starting point for any research project should be a decision on philosophy (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2020). This is because one's own views about the nature of reality and what constitutes knowledge should ideally precede any decisions about strategy and methods. As Saunders et al., (2020, p124) elaborate; “[a] consistent set of assumptions will constitute a credible research philosophy... [allowing researchers] to design a coherent research project”.

3.1.2 Common Research Philosophies in the Theory of Science

According to Guba and Lincoln (2005), there are essentially four main philosophical paradigms in the theory of science; positivism, post positivism, critical theory and constructivism. Table 3.1 summarises the basic beliefs and distinct differences between those four paradigms.

Table 3.1 Basic Beliefs of Alternative Inquiry Paradigms

Aspect	Positivism	Post positivism	Critical Theory	Constructivism
Ontology	Naive realism - “Real” reality but apprehensible	Critical realism - “real” reality but only imperfectly and probabilistically apprehensible	Historical realism - virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender values; crystalised over time	Relativism - local and specific constructed and co-constructed realities
Epistemology	Dualistic/objectivist Findings true	Modified dualistic/ objectivist; critical tradition/ community Findings probably true	Transactional/ subjectivist Value-mediated findings	Transactional/ Subjectivist; created findings
Methodology	Experimental/ manipulative; verification of hypotheses; mainly quantitative methods	Modified experimental/ Manipulative; critical multiplism; falsification of hypotheses may include qualitative methods	Dialogical/ dialectical	Hermeneutical/ dialectical Qualitative methods

(Source: Guba and Lincoln, 2005, p193).

In terms of understanding research philosophy, it would be too reductive to state that there are only two main philosophical camps at opposite ends of the spectrum; i.e. positivist on the one hand and constructionist on the other. In reality, there are many perspectives that fall in between these two viewpoints beyond the four described by Guba and Lincoln (2005) as shown in Table 3.1. As such it is important that researchers be clear about where their own ontological and epistemological assumptions lie at the beginning of their research journey in order to successfully design and manage their study by adopting a methodological approach that matches their own philosophical stance as a researcher and will facilitate the collection of data that is appropriate to the specific objectives and research questions.

3.1.3 Interpretivism

One such philosophical perspective is that of interpretivism, defined as a research paradigm that is “based on the assumption that social reality is not singular or objective. Rather, it is shaped by human experiences and social contexts” (Bhattacharjee, 2022, p99). This PhD research is approached from an interpretivist perspective, with a focus on “understanding the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants” (Bryman, 2012, p266). In a similar way to constructionists, interpretivist researchers share the view that people create their own realities and that lived experience of meaningful phenomena is socially constructed within a framework of a shared culture (Mukherji and Albon, 2015).

Interpretivist perspectives to research have steadily gained popularity within the social sciences (Sherry, 1991). One reason for this could be the recognition that interpretive explanations of social life are generally considered to lie at the heart of all the social sciences (Gadamer, 1975). Other reasons are thought to be its flexibility, its usefulness in facilitating the construction of theory in emerging or under-researched topics, and the ways in which it enables researchers to reveal unique, interesting questions and context-specific topics for future study (Bhattacharjee, 2022).

According to Spiggle (1994, p491) notes that interpretivism can be distinguished from positivism in four distinct ways:

1. Interpretivist research typically adopts interpretive procedures of analysis
2. There is an emphasis on the context of the research
3. Qualitative methods of data collection and analysis are well suited to interpretivist research
4. The work often incorporates emergent research designs and inference processes to connect findings to the data

There may be multiple underlying agendas in interpretivist research depending on the nature of inquiry. For example, some researchers may choose to study “surface phenomena” with a focus on the “importance of semiotics and symbolic markers and how these can illuminate an underlying aspect of social life” (Spiggle, 1994, p492), whereas others may decide to observe participants’ behaviour in a particular setting. Regardless of the specific aims and objectives of a study, most interpretivists are generally “interested in understanding and interpreting the meanings and experiences of their informants” (Spiggle, 1994, p492) and in constructing theory as opposed to testing it (Bhattacharjee, 2022) as is the case in this PhD research.

Furthermore, in terms of developing theory in interpretivist research, there is a risk that the opinions of a researcher may influence the credibility of the study. For example, certain themes from data may be perceived as more important or significant as a result of a researcher's personal opinions (Bell, 2009). Indeed, as with all methods of childhood research that are conducted by adult researchers who tend to share a high level of education, there is always a risk that a researcher's pre-existing assumptions such as those regarding the nature of childhood, gender roles and the "framing" of technologies will inadvertently become embedded into research questions (Kleine et al., 2016 p5). It ought to be recognised that these assumptions may not be shared by the children who are involved in the study and as such, researchers need to be meticulous and cautious when it comes to analysis, so as not to decontextualise children's views by "pulling them through our frame as researchers" (Kleine et al., 2016, p5).

Therefore, the challenge for interpretivist researchers lies in accurately representing children's views. As Bragg (2007, p20) emphasises,

"[i]t is disingenuous to see children as finding, discovering, or being given a voice, as if we can simply access their authentic core being. What they say depends on what they are asked, how they are asked it, 'who' they are invited to speak as in responding; and then, in turn, on the values and assumptions of the researcher or audience interpreting their 'voices'".

The concept of "situated child consumption" refers to the idea that children's consumption practices are situated within specific social, cultural, and contextual settings. Instead of viewing children as passive recipients of commercial messages or as isolated decision-makers, this concept recognises that children's consumption behaviours are deeply influenced by the surrounding environment. This is aligned to the concept of 'actual audience' in advertising research (Ang, 1991) whereby the audience is viewed as an "ever-more multifaceted, fragmented and diversified repertoire of practices and experiences" (O'Sullivan, 2005, p377).

However, it is a perspective that is largely absent in children's advertising research (O'Sullivan, 2005). Therefore, researchers have an opportunity to address this by choosing methodologies which aim to meet children on their own territory, as participants and even as co-researchers (Warren, 2000). In that sense, the interpretivist perspective allows researchers "to start listening to children more seriously" in their studies (O'Sullivan, 2005, p377)

which in this case is achieved by adopting participatory research methods and offering children the chance to choose the best ways to express their views. This aligns with arguments put forward in previous interpretivist research studies, for example the assertion that advertising literacy consists of more than just the cognitive skills that are required to recognise selling and persuasive intent, and that true advertising literacy develops when “children appreciate the use of advertising techniques, strategies, and production values” that are involved in commercial persuasion (Lawlor and Prothero, 2008, p1206). This is strengthened by the use of interviews comprising a mix of questions relating to Situational and Dispositional advertising literacy, to encourage children to talk freely, hence allowing their (advertising-related) thinking to unfold and reveal itself (Woodhead and Faulkner 2000) . Interpretivist research also has the potential to inform policy and practice by making sure that marketers balance the need to develop “products, services and advertising which reflect and respond to children’s authentic needs and wants” (O’Sullivan, 2005, p381) with the need to target children responsibly.

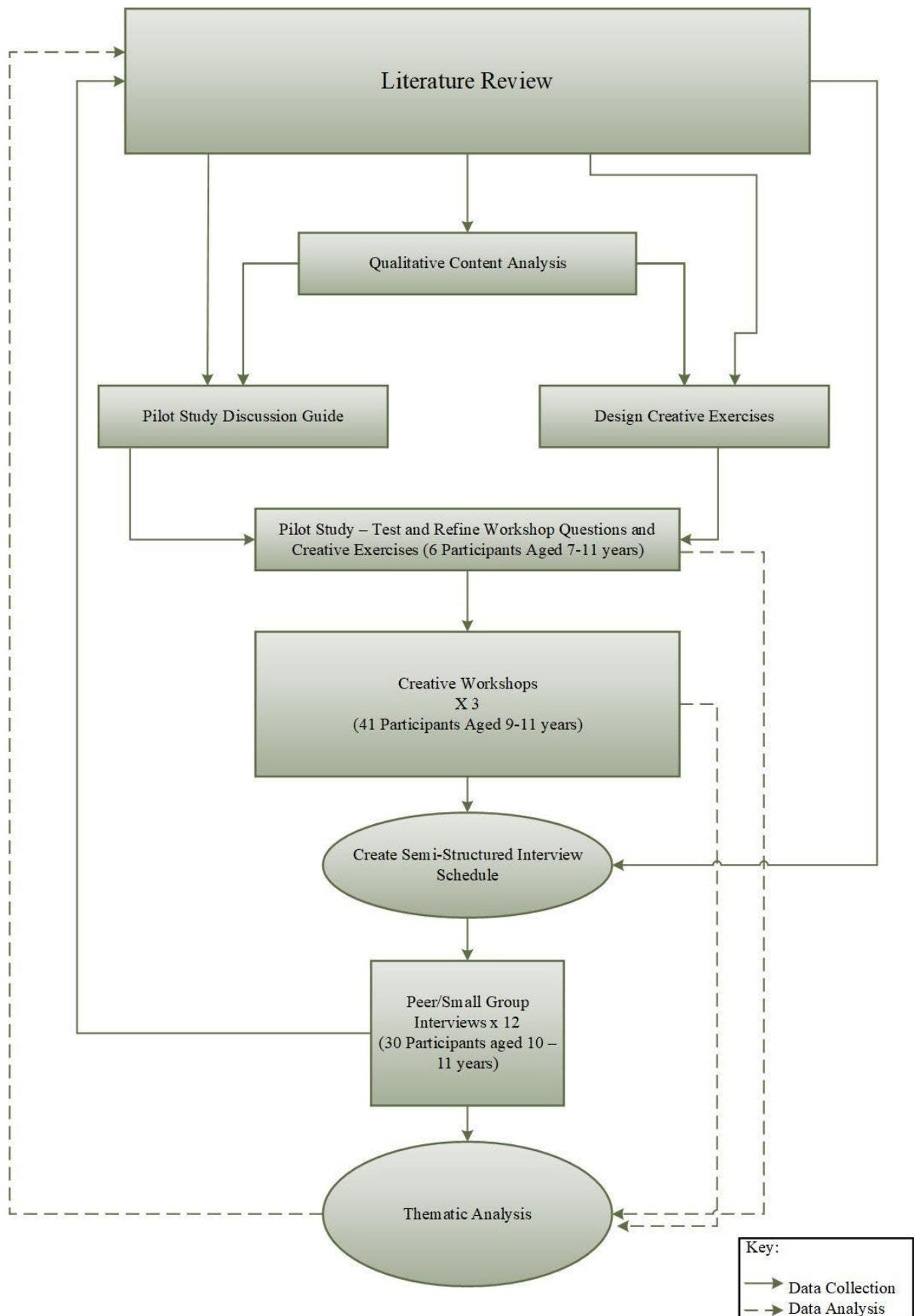
3.2 Research Design

The overall design of this PhD is exploratory, defined by Stebbins, (2001, p3) as;

“a broad-ranging, purposive, systematic, prearranged undertaking...leading to description and understanding of an area of social ... life. Such exploration is...a distinctive way of conducting science—a scientific process—a special methodological approach (as contrasted with confirmation), and a pervasive personal orientation of the explorer. The emergent generalizations are many and varied; they include the descriptive facts, folk concepts, cultural artefacts, structural arrangements, social processes, and beliefs and belief systems normally found there.”

Essentially, exploratory research is all about discovery, by being open, pragmatic and flexible as a researcher (Davies, 2006). In this PhD, a combination of three qualitative methods was adopted in an iterative approach to the overall study, where findings from each phase of data collection were used as a basis for the design and refinement of subsequent stages (AQR, 2019). This exploratory research design (as shown in Figure 3.1) illustrates this approach and also indicates where methods of data collection and data analysis overlapped and fed back into the Literature Review (Chapter 2) and Discussion (Chapter 5) Chapters of this thesis.

Figure 3.1 Research Design



(Source: Author's own work).

According to Bevir and Blakley (2018, p18),

“Determining which concepts and forms of reasoning are appropriate to an empirical domain of study is largely a philosophical task. For this reason, it is no accident that at the roots of all disciplines of knowledge we find an assemblage of philosophical and theoretical considerations. Social science is no exception.”

These philosophical and theoretical assemblages are particularly apparent in interdisciplinary research such as this PhD, which draws from a conceptual framework that encompasses key theoretical and methodological perspectives from the disciplines of marketing and sociology as introduced earlier in Chapter Two (Figure 2.5). A common output of inductive approaches is the development of nuanced or revised frameworks based on what is revealed by the data. Whereas deductive approaches tend to rely upon frameworks that already represent a strong indication of what kind of themes are expected to be found in the data for confirmation purposes (Hunt, 2015).

3.2.1 Interdisciplinary Approaches to Research

Interdisciplinary research has become a well-recognised and established method of knowledge production (Repko, Szostak and Phillips-Buchberger 2017, p27) and has continued to become more pervasive over the last thirty years (Hicks and Katz, 1996; Broto, Gislason and Ehlers, 2009). Despite this, academics have yet to agree upon a single definition of interdisciplinarity and what it means to do interdisciplinary research, (Cooper, 2012) with ambiguous terms such as ‘multidisciplinary’, ‘pluri-disciplinary’ and ‘transdisciplinary’ often used interchangeably within the social sciences to refer to similar ways of working.

The dominant viewpoint appears to be that interdisciplinary approaches are most appropriate within the context of using knowledge to solve societal problems, particularly where issues are the focus of researchers from more than one field (Repko, 2012) or as Lyle (2017, p1176) describes, where experts share a focus on “a common ground that eludes disciplinary dominance”. However it is not just the shared nature of a problem that appears to warrant an interdisciplinary approach, but its complexity. For example, as Repko (2012, p9) goes on to state, the “complex problems facing humanity demand... new ways... to order knowledge and bridge different approaches to its creation and communication”, with complexity defined here as “societal challenges [that] cannot be addressed adequately through traditional disciplinary approaches” (Lyle, 2017, p1169).

Politically, the role of science and research within society is being re-evaluated (May, 2000). As such, interdisciplinarity and collaborative approaches are increasingly positioned as essential strategies for producing meaningful research by both funders and policy makers in the UK. More emphasis is now placed on using knowledge to solve societal problems and less emphasis is given to empiricism and specialisation, which are factors that led to the development of separate academic disciplines in the first place (Repko et al., 2017). This shift in emphasis on the importance of the social robustness of knowledge is a critical factor driving the increased focus on interdisciplinary research (Nowotny et al., 2013). According to Lyle (2017, p1182) the focus on “ensuring academic research achieves ‘impact’ is encouraging greater interdisciplinary collaboration” not just between the physical and social sciences but between academia and industry also.

In addition, the fundamental nature of scientific research has changed over time. For Gibbons et al., (1994) interdisciplinary knowledge marks a shift from discipline-based research and is the result of changes within the internal dynamics of science. This type of knowledge production has its own rules and specific paradigmatic structures, characterised by a “constant back and forth between the fundamental and the applied”, which allows knowledge to flow more freely across disciplinary boundaries (Gibbons et al., 1994, p24). For some, this interdisciplinary, collaborative approach to knowledge production is a necessary shift away from the reductionism that has dominated scientific research (Lessard, 2007). For others, the practice of interdisciplinarity confuses science (Boltanski, 2011).

However, whilst it may be the case that many societal problems are complex in nature, for example the concerns surrounding the effects of marketing on children, to claim that knowledge is the answer to all of society’s problems, is to assert that there is a direct link between the content of knowledge and its consequence (May, 2017). This notion that increasingly complex social problems require increasingly complex knowledge as solutions is not without issue. For “real-world problems do not exist independently of their sociocultural, political...or economic context” (Brewer, 1999, p329). Some scholars doubt the efficacy of using interdisciplinary research to explain social issues (Turner, 2010) and others value the depth and focus that a single disciplinary approach can offer (Shove, 2011; Boltanski, 2011).

Indeed, it is not just the nature of societal challenges that are driving a shift towards interdisciplinary research, but also the processes involved in addressing those challenges.

Calls for co-production and more participatory methods of research with non-academic and community groups are also becoming increasingly common (Connelly et al., 2017).

Generally speaking, interdisciplinarity is viewed as a positive move for all research within the social sciences (Broto et al., 2009; Nowotny et al., 2013; Repko, Szostak and Phillips-Buchberger 2017) and is an approach that is encouraged by many research funding bodies (Connelly et al., 2017) including the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which funded this PhD research. More specifically, as highlighted earlier, interdisciplinarity is also an approach that has gained traction in recent years amongst other contemporary advertising literacy researchers (Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017), yet is still a relatively uncommon approach to research in this area.

3.2.2 Research Methodology

Regardless of whether a study adopts a single discipline or interdisciplinary approach, there are many different designs and methods available to researchers, with the most appropriate depending on the aims and objectives of a specific study and the philosophical beliefs held by the researcher. As Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Botrell (2015, p20) explain;

“methodology transcends method in that it encompasses both a family of methods and the thinking, the overarching paradigm that lies behind [a researcher’s] selection. This enables [researchers] to present as a coherent, interrelated set of procedures. These, in turn, form a discourse about the social practice under consideration.”

3.2.2.1 Quantitative Vs. Qualitative Methods in Marketing Research

In addition, Silverman (2014) compares the selection of suitable methods for a research study to the process of selecting suitable tools for a practical task. Naturally, different methods lead to the generation of a different type of data, which broadly fall under two categories; quantitative or qualitative (Bryman, 2012). In simple terms, quantitative data relates to the generation of numbers via statistical analyses and qualitative data relates to the generation of textual data based on the analysis of words and/or visual artefacts (Bryman, 2012).

It is important to note that methodologies that generate each type of data are not fixed or tied to one research philosophy or another, although certain philosophies are associated with certain methodologies (Guba and Lincoln, 2005) as shown in Table 3.1.

In theory, no methodological approach should be considered superior to any other, rather that certain methods will simply be more suited to certain research projects based on its aims, objectives and questions (Silverman, 2014).

3.2.2.2 The Rise of Mixed Methods Approaches to Research

In reality, it is becoming more common for researchers across the social sciences to employ a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques in their studies (Turner, Cardinal and Burton, 2017). Some argue that methodological pluralism or ‘mixed methods’ approaches can “triangulate” results and insights (Flick 1992, p175) in such a way that allows for a best-of-both-worlds research design, strengthening the reliability of findings and results (Turner et al., 2017; Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). Yet, despite the apparent rise in popularity of mixed-methods research from both funding and publication perspectives (Timans, Wouters and Heilbron, 2019), in order to stay true to the exploratory nature of this PhD study, an interpretivist philosophy and the researcher’s expertise, it was deemed appropriate to adopt a purely qualitative approach to data collection and analysis, which is justified in more detail in the next subsection.

3.2.2.3 The Case for Qualitative Research Methods

The majority of research on marketing to children has actually taken a quantitative approach to data collection and analysis (Sigirci et al., 2022) often using causal or correlational designs incorporating attitudinal surveys or experiments to arrive at statistically-valid conclusions that can usually be generalised to a wider population (Saunders et al., 2020).

Quantitative approaches are logical where studies aim to demonstrate cause and effect relationships and/or test predictions through the manipulation of specific variables and by operationalising and reducing complex constructs (Collis and Hussey, 2009).

As highlighted earlier in Chapter 2, quantitative research studies have undoubtedly enhanced understanding of children’s advertising literacy over the last four decades and provided strong evidence for both the direct and indirect effects of advertising on children (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2003; Oprea et al., 2014). Furthermore, quantitative approaches have also enabled scholars to develop and validate specific scales, for example the Advertising Literacy Scale for children (ALS-c) (Rozendaal, Oprea and Buijzen, 2016) and the Persuasion Knowledge Scale for Children (PKSC) (Boerman et al., 2018).

However, according to Stebbins (2001, p9)

“exploration is the preferred methodological approach...when a group, process, activity, or situation... has been largely examined using prediction and control rather than flexibility and open-mindedness, or ... has changed so much along the way that it begs to be explored anew”.

Therefore, it could be argued that despite the dominance of quantitative studies in this field, when one considers how much the advertising and marketing landscape has evolved over the last 40 years, qualitative, rather than quantitative approaches may be particularly valuable in exploratory research with children. Within social sciences research generally, this quest for rich insights or a “deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation” is a common justification for adopting a purely qualitative approach (Kapoulas and Mitic, 2012, p356).

As Miles and Huberman, (1994, p56) state: “Although words may be more unwieldy than numbers, they can render more meaning than numbers alone”. In other words, qualitative data may be more complicated, messy and time consuming to analyse (Silverman, 2014), but it can provide researchers with more valuable insights than statistics alone. This is especially relevant to this PhD, where the researcher holds an interpretivist perspective and sought to “enter the social world of the research participants and [attempt to] understand that world from their point of view” Saunders et al., (2020, p141). More specifically, the aim was to explore the value in incorporating sociological perspectives on children’s consumption with existing theories of advertising literacy. The use of qualitative methods in children’s marketing research is further supported by several researchers. For example, O’Sullivan, (2005 p381) highlights:

“using qualitative methods to map the world of children, including their consumer behaviour, may yield more insight into questions about advertising and children than any amount of positivist empirical research.”

Qualitative research, with its capacity “to document the world from the point of view of the people studied” (Hammersley, 1992, p165) may hold the key to enlightening scholars on the “complexity of what children are” and “the role of advertising in their lives” (O’Sullivan, 2005, p377). Warren (2000) recommends that academics who conduct marketing research with young participants should adopt qualitative methodologies, such as those that combine scientific rigour with imagination and creativity (Veale, 2005) in order to provide opportunities to involve children in the research process. It was also deemed appropriate to adopt a purely qualitative methodology in this PhD research because key components of the initial conceptual framework (Figure 2.5) were based upon previous interpretivist, qualitative studies (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008; Buijzen et al., 2010; Lawlor et al., 2016).

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Participants

The participants in this research were children aged between 9 and 11 years. A total of 41 participants were selected using non-probability purposive sampling, which provides a pathway to accessing valuable data from specific groups in qualitative research (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2015). Initially, the researcher wanted to involve a slightly wider age range of children in this project, including children aged 7 and 8 years old, because on balance, fewer advertising literacy studies have been conducted with children under the age of 9 (Sigirci et al., 2022), which is perhaps a reflection of the difficulties involved in acquiring permission to conduct research with children. Indeed, these difficulties, combined with the challenges of conducting face-to-face fieldwork in a global pandemic were the reasons why this PhD just focuses on children in this age group and are discussed further in Subsection 3.4.1.1.

Despite the philosophical shortcomings of developmentalism as a paradigm as noted in Section 2.2.5.1, the general consensus among most advertising literacy researchers is that the popularity of John's (1999) model endures because it provides a ready-made, established framework for segmenting children and young adolescents within marketing research projects based on their age. One of the strengths of John's (1999) model is that it is an amalgamation of a vast amount of theory from developmental psychology and consumer socialisation research. It provides clear explanations of children's assumed competencies at each stage of their development that can assist researchers in tailoring their research projects to suit.

It is expected that during this pre-adolescent period of development, children's abilities to process marketing information increase, and as such, they begin to consider the more symbolic aspects of products when making consumer decisions (John, 1999). As such, it was assumed that most children aged 9-11 years who attend a mainstream school will be able to read simple product/brand names and information, but will not yet have developed the complex, adult-like processing and associated scepticism expected of an older age group (John, 1999). It was also anticipated that participants would likely be able to concentrate for longer periods than younger children and that the researcher would be able to gain valuable insights into the participants' perceptions of a variety of marketing formats, contexts and messages. The decision to conduct this PhD study with this age group is also in line with

previous, similar research in this area (Lawlor and Prothero, 2008; Vanwesenbeeck, Ponnet and Walrave, 2016; Williams et al., 2016; Daems et al., 2017; De Pauw et al., 2018). Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that this research originally planned to involve a wider age range of children including 7- and 8-year-olds as well, because the literature suggests that this age group is less commonly researched than the 9-11 group (Nelson, 2018). However, it proved so difficult to recruit participants following the covid lockdowns that permission could only be obtained to work with children aged 9 - 11 years of age (in school years 5 and 6) and only then after a long process, which involved explaining how the topic of the research complimented the host school's curriculum.

It is important to stress that as an exploratory study, making comparisons between age groups was never the intention. It can be a difficult approach to justify particularly in a discipline where quantitative research dominates with its expectations around scientific sample selection. The design adopted in this PhD research would work for both a younger age group and an older age group, obviously with some adjustments to the creative tasks and the language used and potentially some minor adjustments to the time allowed for each workshop (i.e. shorter workshops for younger children and longer workshops for older age groups). The important thing was to move away from an age-based competency perspective to a socio-contextual perspective in children's advertising literacy research.

Some researchers have encountered difficulties in interpreting the perspectives of children aged between 8 and 12 years of age. For example, Hieftje, Duncan and Fiellin (2014) noted that children may sometimes provide unanticipated and difficult to interpret answers to questions. Despite this, there is an argument to be made against disregarding such responses; "Although researchers might intend for an activity to open discussion about a particular topic, young adolescents may use the activity in a different way ... The data that subsequently emerge ... provide poignant insights into young adolescents' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours" (Hieftje et al., 2014, p720). In that respect, the interpretivist perspective is well suited to this PhD research, where the questions focus on the social aspects of consumption in context as an alternative approach to the study of children's advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment.

3.3.2 Recruitment

Whilst it is acknowledged that conducting research with young people is very rewarding, it can also prove rather difficult to undertake in practice. As Lapierre (2019, p499) describes;

“I would love to be in the field right now working with children. But I hear the voices of providers who are sceptical about letting me collect data... the voices of parents who hedge regarding their child’s participation, and I hear the voices of reviewers who mark the study as fatally flawed because my significant findings come from too small a sample.”

Here Lapierre (2019a) highlights one of the main stumbling blocks for qualitative researchers who want to work with children. It relates to the issue of accessibility, in particular how difficult it can be for student researchers to gain access to child participants. It is certainly true that the recruitment of participants for this PhD research was far from a straightforward process. After receiving ethical approval for the study from the university’s ethics committee and undertaking an Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check, the researcher sent numerous emails to multiple primary and junior schools across the United Kingdom over a period of several months inviting them to take part in the research, the majority of which received no response or acknowledgement. The national lockdowns in the UK as a result of the coronavirus pandemic during 2020 and early 2021 further hindered the recruitment process as many children were learning from home, rather than within the school environment. Furthermore, when face-to-face lessons resumed with the reopening of schools in England in March 2021, the few schools that did respond to contact made by the researcher reported that unfortunately, they were under increased pressure to catch up for lost learning time and therefore appeared to be less willing and able to host visitors looking to engage in “non-essential activities” such as an external student researcher. Inevitably, these challenges resulted in the recruitment of fewer participants than originally planned for. These issues are returned to later on in the Conclusions Chapter.

3.3.3 Child-friendly Research Methods

As this research involved children as opposed to adult participants, there were a number of additional logistical, practical and ethical issues to consider before data collection could commence.

On reflection, one of the earliest methodological decisions was actually made by the researcher before her application to study this topic at PhD level was even submitted. To provide some context, prior to commencing this doctoral degree the researcher worked as a social marketing practitioner in a behaviour change agency and had experience of conducting

research with children and young people in a non-academic setting. One of the key principles of social marketing is the idea of involvement (David and Rundle-Thiele, 2019), therefore participatory and co-creation methods are common approaches to qualitative research in social marketing projects.

3.3.3.1 Participatory Research with Children and Young People

The concept of involving people in research originally stems from ‘action research’; an approach introduced by Kurt Lewin in 1944 (Adelman, 1993). This approach is also commonly referred to as ‘participatory action research’ and is characterised by the involvement of individuals or groups of people in the research process. In other words conducting research ‘with’ them as opposed to doing research ‘on’ them (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Participatory approaches can also be distinguished from other more traditional qualitative methods such as ethnography, in that the methods involved usually require a certain level of participation from the participants beyond observation or asking them to answer questions (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015).

When it comes to research involving children, some researchers have argued “for kids' views to be taken seriously and treated with respect” (Calvert, 2008, p2). This view is representative of the influence of The UN Convention on the Rights of The Child (UNCRC) regulations, which were first introduced in 1992. The UN Convention has 54 articles that cover all aspects of a child’s life and seek to set out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights that all children are entitled to - wherever they reside across the globe (UNICEF, 2022). The regulations explain how adults and governments must work together to make sure all children can enjoy all their rights. As of March 2021, following the adoption of The General Comment No.25, the UNCRC regulations now apply to children’s experiences within the online environment as well (5Rights Foundation, 2021).

Taking children’s views seriously (O’Sullivan, 2005) was a very important consideration when designing this PhD research. The researcher was keen to understand and represent children’s perspectives properly and develop a design that would align with her own interests and maintain a strong commitment to ethical research by incorporating principles of participatory and creative research methods.

10 principles are listed below that have been selected from best-practice guidelines from The Institute of Development Studies (Seballos and Tanner, 2009) and prior research (Kleine, Pearson and Proveda, 2016)

1. Researchers should think of children as active participants or even co-researchers, not just as passive research subjects
2. Where possible, include children’s input when shaping the research project
3. Consider what participants will get out of the research. Is it appropriate to link the research with an advocacy or development aim?
4. Consider whether you can partner with relevant local community organisations that might benefit from the research findings, provide pastoral support, ensure sustainability of empowerment gains made by participants and that can take the research findings forward in practice and policy
5. Where possible, include children as contributors or peer researchers. In most cases it is appropriate to combine this with other methods (and researcher triangulation)
6. Choose informal, playful methods where appropriate
7. With visual methods, document both the product and the process/explanation to the children
8. Consider the opportunities digital methods offer, while remaining aware of digital divides among the participant group
9. Be open to new directions, suggestions and surprises emerging from the perspective of the children in your research
10. Engage children (for instance in workshops) in analysing the findings, identifying implications and in devising and executing research impact plans

The researcher was able to incorporate five of these principles into the methodological design of this PhD study as shown in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Incorporation of Participatory Research Principles into Research Design

Principle of participatory research	How it was applied in this PhD
Relevance: the subject of the research relates to children’s priorities and is facilitated in a way that allows them to relate to the topic and find it meaningful	Creation of child-friendly research methods that match classroom activities. Allow participants to suggest topics of interest.
Creativity: creative methods keep children motivated and help them to communicate freely	Creation of child-friendly research methods and relaxed, informal group setting. Give participants the choice of activity that best suits their interests.
Participation: by being given the opportunity to give feedback on the approaches used and the	Using interactive activities.

<p>knowledge generated, children can influence and co-shape the research and feel empowerment and ownership of the findings</p>	<p>Using follow up interviews with children from the workshops.</p> <p>Assigning children an “expert role” - explaining that they are the expert on their own media use, and explaining that the purpose of the interview is to better understand what the children already know.</p> <p>Explain to the children the understanding gained from the interview, and ask them if it’s right or if they wish to correct or add anything.</p>
<p>Flexibility: research processes must remain open and responsive</p>	<p>Pilot test materials and make amendments (i.e. removing questions that don’t work or are too difficult to answer).</p> <p>Provide laminated cards for children who are less confident in their writing abilities for certain creative workshop tasks.</p> <p>Be prepared to amend the order of questions and creative tasks depending on the nature of the participants.</p>
<p>Empowerment: research processes should allow space for children to reflect on their new knowledge and understanding, preferably within peer groups, as well as build their confidence in their ability to act and voice their views</p>	<p>Use of peer group interviews.</p> <p>Use of children’s own language, glossary and expressions in verbal summaries.</p> <p>Pay careful attention to the dynamics of the situation, including such practicalities as making sure to sit at the same height as the children or on the floor during group tasks.</p>

(Source: Seballos and Tanner, 2009; Kleine, Pearson and Proveda, 2016).

As this PhD project progressed, this direction was further ratified as the researcher began to learn and discover more about sociological perspectives on childhood. For example, in terms of research philosophy, sociology encourages the recognition of “children as people with abilities and capabilities different from, rather than simply less than, adults” (James, 1999, p246) when choosing appropriate research methods. This idea was both encouraging and reassuring based on the whole philosophy underpinning this PhD thesis, which emphasises the importance of exploring children’s perspectives, understanding their reality and representing their voices. In addition to acknowledging children’s agency, James (1999,

p492) suggests that researchers adopt an “adventurous” methodology to engage young participants so that “research *on* childhood can be effected through research *with* children” (original emphasis).

3.3.3.2 Engaging Children in Qualitative Research via “Adventurous” Methodologies

According to Heath, Charles, Crow and Wiles (2007, p409) the use of creative, visual methods can contribute to a more “child-friendly” research design. It is the view of this researcher that the inclusion of interactive activities as data collection ‘tools’ makes the overall research process more engaging for children and young people. Giving them something creative to do that stimulates their imagination helps to elicit more thoughtful and insightful responses to questions, and allows them to choose the means to express their views (Vaart et al., 2018).

3.3.3.3 The Creative Workshop Method

Hence, the researcher opted to use a ‘creative workshop’ method with participants in the first phase of data collection. This technique is widely used within the advertising industry by practitioners, for example to audience-test campaign materials (Daems, Moons and De Pelsmacker, 2017) and has been used by the researcher previously as a practitioner, yet it is still considered to be a relatively uncommon data collection method within academic marketing research. Furthermore, very few academic studies have adopted this method in advertising literacy research with children to date (Daems et al., 2017). Therefore, the researcher wanted to seize the opportunity to apply this underutilised method in this PhD study. Creative workshops share many characteristics with traditional focus groups, such as involving a small group of individuals who share something in common, gathering data on subjective experiences of the participants and being led by a facilitator who guides the discussion on topics of interest (Hennessy and Heary, 2005). However, the main difference with creative workshops is that they are more ‘hands-on’ than focus groups in that the workshops typically include practical, creative activities with participants in addition to group discussions around a particular set of topics (Vaart, Hoven and Huigen, 2018). These workshops are also a type of co-creation, where projects involve participants in the research process, instead of doing research ‘on’ them (Ryan, 2012). Co-creation approaches aim to address the power imbalances that are inherent within traditional research, (Ryan, 2012; Bell and Pahl, 2018) particularly that which involves children (Christensen and Prout, 2002),

building upon the notion of agency - that is, for every citizen to have a voice and be represented (Giddens, 1984; Bennett and Roberts, 2004). These approaches define participants as “capable, responsible, situated, active participants in creating their lives” (Ryan, 2012, p317) and call on researchers to reject preconceived notions of assumed vulnerability (Christiansen and Prout, 2002).

The few studies that have incorporated a creative workshop into their research design have shown it to be a favourable method, which could be considered to be reflective of a clear trend towards participatory approaches in research with children (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015). For example, a study conducted by Daems et al., (2017) consisted of eight co-creation workshops with children with the aim of developing a new advertising literacy campaign. They conducted four workshops with 19 children aged 9 - 10 years (11 girls and 8 boys) and four workshops involving 16 teenagers aged 12 - 13 years (10 girls and 6 boys) in a Flemish school. Each workshop included a general introduction to advertising and was subsequently structured around two main research questions; 1) the media contexts that children encounter and 2) children’s views on different campaign elements such as channels, spokespeople and messaging (Daems et al., 2017). The four workshops based on the first research question used a ‘customer journey’ task, which involved asking children to recall the advertisements that they encountered during a typical day and their attitudes towards them. The four workshops based on research question two focused on game-based tasks; using an adaption of the “Goose” board game as well as some brainstorming activities to draw out which campaign elements children found the most appealing to them, such as the use of fantasy appeals, humour and cartoons within advertising (Daems et al, 2017, p58). Overall, the use of the creative workshop method allowed the researchers to “playfully and more spontaneously explore [children’s] knowledge, concerns and motivations” relating to advertising campaigns (Daems et al., 2017 p65) which aligns with the researcher’s views here.

In another recent study, De Jans, Vanwesenbeeck, Cauberghe, Hudders, Rozendaal and van Reijmersdal (2018) organised four co-creation workshops with 24 children aged 8 - 11 years in a Belgian school, which aimed to develop and test a child-inspired advertising disclosure. As with the aforementioned Daems et al., (2017) study, each workshop began with a brief explanation about advertising, and also an introduction to different digital and embedded forms of advertising and how these are typically presented in the Belgian media. After a short group discussion, children were instructed to write their thoughts onto ‘sticky notes’ (post-it

notes) which were placed onto a whiteboard and used as the basis of a further group discussion. Following that, children were given 15 minutes to design their own symbols to disclose advertising on A5 craft paper and then asked to give feedback to the group and explain why they had chosen specific colours, shapes and words (De Jans et al., 2018).

Based on these two studies, when developing the plan for the pilot study and subsequent creative workshops to be used in this PhD study, the researcher also decided to include some general questions relating to children's awareness of contemporary advertising formats at the beginning of each session. The researcher also opted to follow the same approach as Daems et al., (2017) and De Jans et al, (2018) whereby the interactive tasks given to the children were used as elicitation tools to stimulate further conversation and discussion rather than analysing the outputs of the tasks as separate artefacts.

However, in contrast to the approach taken in the two studies mentioned here, the researcher was keen to ensure that children had a choice of tasks in the creative workshops. Again, this was an important decision to ensure a child-friendly research design and allow the participants to choose an exercise that they would enjoy and feel comfortable completing. In addition, offering the children a choice on how to express themselves reduced the power imbalance that can sometimes occur when conducting research with children (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Botrell, 2015). Whilst this was considered to be the most suitable approach, the decision to offer the participants a choice of activity resulted in the challenge of having to develop three of the four workshop exercises from scratch.

Whilst there are many texts available on the benefits of involving children in research, as well as increasing awareness amongst research methods scholars of innovative techniques such as arts-based and play-based methods (e.g. body-mapping, expressive dance and story mapping) (Molden, 2020; McGrath, Durrer and Campbell, 2021; Finney and Cresswell, 2022; Lockett and Bagelman, 2023) there is a real lack of guidance on how to actually adapt or apply these principles in practice for those researchers who wish to undertake this type research, so this point is returned to in the Discussion Chapter (Section 5.5.2.2) and Conclusions Chapter (Section 6.5).

3.3.4 Developing Appropriate Activities as Research Tools for use in Creative Workshops

As a starting point, the researcher revisited the proposed pilot study questions and considered how they might fit with a creative task. For questions relating to advertising awareness and exposure, the researcher considered adapting the ‘customer journey’ exercise used in the Daems et al., (2017) study but decided against it for two reasons. The first being that a significant focus of this PhD research is children’s perceptions of covert marketing and advertising, and having reflected on the literature, the assumption was that children may only be able to recall advertisements that they had previously recognised (i.e. overt advertising) and been able to recall, which no doubt would have provided some useful insights but there was a risk that these insights would probably not be rich enough to be able to address the research questions posed in this PhD. The second reason, based on the method outlined by Daems et al., (2017) was that this type of exercise would probably rely on questioning children about the perceived *frequency of exposure* to such advertising. However, as this type of information is already freely available from organisations such as the ASA in the UK, the assumption was that this data would not have added much value to this PhD study.

Returning to the aim of this research and the first research question (RQ1), it was considered important to understand what children *think* about different types of contemporary advertising and commercially motivated persuasion formats, not just find out how often they believe that they encounter it. Hence, there was a need to develop different tasks that would not only be interesting to the children involved and relevant in terms of addressing the specific research questions but that would also be appropriate to their age and representative of the type of activities that they are used to completing within a school environment.

Therefore, the decision was made to focus on the general advertising awareness questions at the start of the workshop and not to develop these into a specific task to match the approach taken in the two similar studies conducted by Daems et al., (2017) and De Jans et al., (2018).

As shown in Figure 3.1, following on from the literature review, it was considered necessary to understand the current children’s marketing landscape in as much detail as possible prior to commencing fieldwork. This decision was based on the social marketing practice of including a ‘scoping phase’ into projects in order to set the scene for the research, to understand the background and context of the research problem (David and Rundle-Thiele, 2019), to understand the participants and to inform the design of stimulus materials or research tools where necessary (Eagle, Dahl, Hill, Bird and Spotswood, 2013).

Here, the researcher was able to take further inspiration from her professional background in behaviour change and social marketing research by utilising both an inquiry-based pedagogical perspective and a design-thinking approach in planning this research.

3.3.4.1 Inquiry-based Pedagogical Perspectives in Childhood Research

One of the ways that researchers can develop creative activities that can be used as research tools is by adopting an inquiry-based pedagogical perspective (Bruce and Bishop, 2002; Harwood, 2010). At the centre of this perspective are four fundamental principles of the primary education system in the UK. These include 1) an emphasis on learning through play (Marsh et al., 2018), 2) the development of gross and fine motor skills (De Bruijn, Mombarg and Timmermans (2022), 3) engagement in physical activity (De Bruijn et al., 2022) and 4) the importance of healthy personal and social development in childhood (Dowling, 2000). With its roots in early years and childhood research, this perspective is particularly suitable for use in research projects that involve children and young people. Researchers should consider these principles when developing creative tasks to make the most of participants' familiarity with the formats of existing classroom or childhood activities thus maximising the time spent with their participants. This was a consideration in this research (as discussed later in Subsection 5.4.2.3), where the original 90-minute workshop plan had to be adapted into several 45-minute sessions, in order to fit in with the host schools schedule and avoid excessive disruption to the participants usual timetable.

3.3.4.2 Applying Design Thinking to the Research Planning Process

As the famous advertiser George Lois once said:

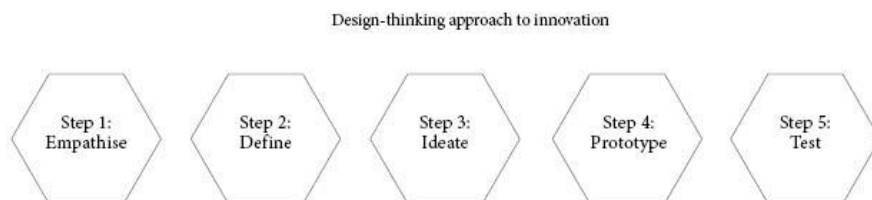
“Creativity can solve almost any problem. The creative act, the defeat of habit by originality, overcomes everything.”

If one assumes that most, if not all research, aims to address a research ‘problem’ of sorts, then it is possible to see how a design-thinking approach can provide a useful blueprint for the design of creative research projects. To illustrate this point, parallels can be drawn between the design thinking approach and exploratory research. For example, Lewrick et al., (2020, p18) explain that in order to apply design thinking successfully one must:

“Bid farewell to prejudices on how things work... put aside expectations about what will happen, strengthen our curiosity to understand problems in depth, open ourselves up to new possibilities, ask simple questions [and] try things out and learn from it”

Design thinking has long been considered a staple approach to innovation and is beginning to attract more interest from disciplines outside of its origins in engineering (Lewrick, Link and Leifer, 2020). At the heart of the method is the concept of using creativity to solve problems (Weinberg, 2020). The benefits of interdisciplinarity are also a key element of design thinking. In other words, creativity can facilitate innovation within academic research, it can help researchers branch out from existing “habits” in research methodology. The challenge in developing creative methods lies in balancing the needs of the study, i.e. “maximising the potential for truthful answers” (Brewer, 2012, p3) with the rights of the participants and the ethics of protecting them from harm as a result of taking part in research (Chan and Schaffrath, 2017; Newton, 2017). The challenge is context-dependent, but in order to ensure methodological rigour, it is important to choose the right ‘tools’ when involving children in creative and participatory research. Hence, design-thinking offers a systematic approach to the development of such tools, the novelty of which is discussed later on in Chapter 5 (Section 5.4).

Figure 3.2 Principles of the Design Thinking Approach to Innovation



(Source: Lewrick et al., 2020).

This thesis posits that the key principles of design thinking can be applied to the development of creative research methods as explained in the following subsections.

Step One: Empathise = Content Analysis

The design thinking process begins with the ‘Empathise’ stage, which is concerned with learning more about the target audience or end-users (or in the case of a research project; participants). Understanding more about the participants themselves helps to ensure that research tools are interesting, relevant and appropriate to them.

In the case of this PhD, the first stage of the research consisted of a content analysis, which was conducted to help guide the plan for a pilot study, as well as provide a solid basis for the development of fieldwork discussion guides and creative workshop tasks to ensure the topics and questions covered during the data collection phase were both topical and relevant to the young participants of the research.

When researching the most appropriate way to conduct a content analysis, it became apparent that there are a number of different methods for analysing ‘content’, which in this case is defined as written, visual and audio texts, materials and artefacts, from a range of media likely to be accessed by children. Analysing multimedia texts has quite a long history across the social sciences (Hill and Allen, 2021) and like all research methods, the content analysis options available vary depending on the research design and epistemological and ontological assumptions of the researcher. For example, some of the most common content analysis methods employed within the social sciences include Quantitative Content Analysis defined as “an approach to the analysis of documents or texts that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories” Bryman (2012, p181), Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) which is defined as “an approach of empirical, methodological controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analytical rules and step by step models, without rash quantification.” (Mayring, 2000, p2). Other methods include Discourse Analysis, defined as “the study of language in use. It is the study of the meanings we give language and the actions we carry out when we use language in specific contexts” (Gee and Handford, 2012, p1) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MMDA) which asserts that ‘language’ is just one among the many resources for making meaning. MMDA implies that “the modal resources available in a culture need to be seen as one coherent, integral field of – nevertheless distinct – resources for making meaning. MMDA needs to encompass all modes used in any text or text-like entity, with each described both in terms specific to its material and historical affordances and in terms shared... The point of a multimodal approach is to get beyond approaches where mode was integrally linked, often in a mutually defining

way, with a theory and a discipline”. (Kress, 2012, p38). In addition, two other commonly used content analysis methods include Visual Analysis, which uses “visual materials of some kind as part of the process of generating evidence in order to explore research questions” (Rose, 2014, p25) and Social Semiotic Analysis, which allows researchers to unpick texts in great detail, and look at similarities and differences at both a connotative and denotative level (Van Leeuwen, 2005).

Reflecting on these methods, the researcher decided to undertake a Qualitative Content Analysis of marketing materials (visual and audio texts, materials and artefacts), from a range of media likely to be accessed by children. This pre-fieldwork analysis was essential to help the researcher make decisions about which topics to focus on in the creative workshops by uncovering common themes, elements and persuasive tactics that exist within child-targeted marketing materials and how best to explore those using a child-friendly research design.

As well as being an appropriate method for interpretivist researchers, this method also allows for a broader scope of reflection than some of the alternative methods, for example visual analysis, which focuses more on just imagery (Rose, 2014). Previous researchers have used content analysis to explore how additional elements of texts (i.e. design elements and written elements) come together across a range of media texts including advertisements (Xu, 2012), news articles (Thurlow et al., 2020), and more recently, Internet memes (Hill and Allen, 2021).

Selection of Materials

As a starting point, the researcher reviewed a number of publications from sources of ‘grey’ literature to provide a snapshot of up-to-date consumption trends from current market research reports into children’s media use, such as those produced by ‘Kids Insights’, ‘Ofcom’ and ‘Intel Market Research’. These reports were instrumental in mapping areas of interest and highlighting which relevant media, platforms and product categories would be a good idea to focus on in the fieldwork.

Inclusion Criteria

One of the key questions to answer when conducting any kind of content analysis relates to sampling, in particular questions concerning a) how to search for texts, b) how to choose

which texts to look at and c) how to decide upon a unit of analysis (Hill and Allen, 2021). It was considered to be important to include a range of source types in this analysis as both online and offline child-targeted marketing materials were the focus of this PhD research. Hill and Allen (2021) also recommend that researchers should start with a broad search and subsequently narrow this down, then decide whether the document or text is for a particular purpose and strive to gain a full appreciation of the source. The researcher utilised a number of sources when selecting online marketing content including google searches, websites such as Socialblade and Euromonitor which allows for the targeted search and retrieval of data from popular social media platforms (e.g. YouTube). For offline materials, the researcher made several visits to supermarkets, fast food chains and sites of outdoor advertising to take photos and made field notes on the types of marketing and advertisements on display.

Materials were selected for inclusion in the analysis according to the following criteria set out in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Inclusion criteria for materials in content analysis

Criteria	Justification	Evidence
English language	To make analysis more straightforward for the researcher who is a native English speaker	Written/spoken in English
Publication Date < 5 years old	To ensure that the material analysed is representative of the materials likely to be accessed by children aged 7-11 years old and to exclude material from before they were born or too young to recall	Date of publication
Indication of targeting to children	To ensure that material analysed is a form of child-targeted contemporary advertising in line with the focus of this PhD	Content/Material may feature one or more of the following categories of interest: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toys • HFSS • Games • Sport • Fashion • Music • Beauty
Topical/Timely relevance to UK children	To ensure questions relate to participants' own topics of interest	Popularity of material (online) Physical presence in UK (offline)

Offline marketing method	To ensure that material analysed represents the contemporary marketing communications mix	Material in one of the following formats: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Television (including product placement) • Print • Out of home (OOH) • Product packaging • In store sales promotion (multibuy/BOGOF offers) • Point of Sale • Sponsorship
Online marketing method	To ensure that material analysed represents the contemporary marketing communications mix	Material in one of the following formats: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media (including product placement) • Websites • YouTube Video • TikTok video • In game • Influencer marketing • Advergame

(Source: Author's own work).

Criteria 1 and 2 were included to make the analysis more straightforward (i.e. being written in the English language). Criteria 3, 4, 5 and 6 were developed based on the review of academic and grey literature relating to contemporary children's advertising as discussed in Chapter 2 in Section 2.3.

Analysis of Materials

Once materials had been selected for analysis, the researcher developed a checklist of internal criticism questions based on the descriptive possibilities of content analysis (adapted from Bell, 2009)

- **Production**
 - Conventions used, who, how, and why?
- **Image**
 - How are the conventions used?
 - Visual and textual discourses
- **Audience**
 - Who it's made for

- How do people receive it?

Furthermore, based on the content characteristics identified in Chapter Two, (i.e. message, product, and source characteristics) the researcher chose to organise these internal criticism questions into three overarching categories; tone, format and content as shown in Table 3.4 below.

Table 3.4 Internal Criticism Questions Applied to Materials

Tone	Format	Content
Did the author experience or observe what is being described?	What type of text is it?	Key terms used?
Are they being truthful or dishonest?	Is it typical or exceptional of its type?	Imagery?
Exaggerated or distorted views?	Is it complete or altered/edited in some way?	Topic/s covered in text?
What does the text actually say?	Relevant metrics? (likes, subscribers/views/shares)	Brand/product placement mentions? Music? Country of origin?
What is the main or purported purpose of the text?	How long is it? (minutes/pages)	Commercial intent? Implicit or explicit?
Who is the audience?	When was it produced?	Who is the author/producer?

(Source: Bell, 2009)

Step Two: Define = Bring Together Content Analysis Insights and Research Questions

In the second stage; ‘Define’ - the focus is on defining the key questions relating to the central problem under investigation. In research terms, this may relate directly to the formation of research questions, which are likely to be influenced by previous research and existing literature and evidence in the field.

From an interpretivist perspective, the conclusions drawn from the content analysis work are inevitably a reflection of the researcher’s own personal interpretations. Hence, there are several points that should be acknowledged. As with the subjective interpretation of any content, social researchers may put his or her own “spin” on a text (Bryman, 2012, p391). However, this is not necessarily a disadvantage of qualitative research. As Scott, (1990) describes, in-depth analysis is simply not possible without the mediation between the frames

of reference of the researcher and the producer of the text. Despite this, it is important to note that detailed interpretation of the texts was *not* the intended purpose of the content analysis work in this PhD, therefore it is not considered to be a limitation of this study.

The findings from the content analysis were used by the researcher in a purely descriptive sense. This preliminary analysis helped to provide context and direction for the fieldwork rather than to inform theory (Drisko and Maschis, 2015). Areas of interest were noted and used to shape the research tasks, which ensured that these were not just topical and relevant to the participants but also aligned to the specific research questions in this study; (reproduced below for ease of reference).

- RQ1: *What are children's perceptions of contemporary advertising formats?*
- RQ2: *What can a sociological perspective on consumption reveal about the nature of children's advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment?*
- RQ3: *How is children's advertising literacy enacted in practice?*

Step Three: Ideate = Design Research Tools

Next, the 'Ideate' phase represents the brainstorming and thought process behind the development of potential solutions to a problem. Again, in research terms, this can refer to the development of research activities, stimulus materials and tasks.

Step Four: Prototype = Create Research Tools

In the fourth stage; 'Prototype', engineers will typically develop a prototype or 'draft' version of product/machine/ or process based on the insights from the first three steps. In parallel with research, this phase can be seen to relate to the development of draft discussion guides, and initial versions of tasks or exercises.

The researcher decided to include two whole-group activities in the workshops to help make the session more interactive and encourage participation at the beginning and end of each session. The researcher decided to use a 'Graffiti Wall' as the first activity, having had some prior experience of using this data collection technique in a previous professional marketing role (see Subsection 3.4.3.1). In addition, in order to gain deeper insights into children's understanding of *how* brands and products are marketed to them, the researcher also wanted to develop tasks that would explore children's awareness of multiple marketing techniques. Therefore, the researcher developed the Value Trolley Task as the second whole-

group activity (see Subsection 3.4.3.4). In addition, the researcher also wanted to give participants the option to choose an activity to complete within the workshops. Hence, the researcher adapted the design task outlined in De Jans et al., (2018), into two other creative workshop exercises; 1) a packaging design task and 2) a YouTube storyboarding task.

Reflecting on the literature, the researcher felt that one of the strengths of De Jans et al. 's (2018) study was the inclusion of a task that required children to think like marketers. In De Jans et al.'s (2018) study, children were asked to design an advertising disclosure that would be appropriate and effective for children of a similar age to themselves. This technique captured the researcher's attention as it seemed to align well with the assertions introduced previously in Section 2.2.5, which support the reasoning that true literacy develops when "children appreciate the use of advertising techniques, strategies, and production values", which are typically involved in commercial persuasion (Lawlor and Prothero, 2008, p1206). In other words, there is value in asking children to create their own advertising and marketing materials because this may actually give a better indication of their level of understanding compared to cognitive or recognition-based questions only (Nelson, 2016, p171).

Adopting this data collection method may circumvent the issue of children believing that there are correct and incorrect answers to a researcher's questions because the focus is on their own unique interpretations of advertising. This helps to maintain a more equal dynamic between researcher and participant, which is an important consideration when conducting research ethically. With this in mind, the researcher decided that this approach could also be an effective way of exploring the concept of advertising literacy with children, by moving beyond questions relating to conceptual knowledge about advertising and marketing (Nelson, 2016) and drawing out deeper insights into children's preferences and understanding, by developing research tasks that would require a level of application of advertising knowledge.

Step Five: Test = Pilot study

Lastly, the 'Testing' phase relates directly to the pilot testing phase in a research project, where ideas can be tested with the target participants and amended in light of feedback and issues that arise during this phase.

Having prepared an initial plan for the creative workshops encompassing the aforementioned tasks the researcher was keen to 'test the water' with young participants to check the

suitability of the chosen methods and activities (Chenail, 2011) prior to commencing the fieldwork. A pilot study took place in June 2021 with just six participants due to the restrictions on social gatherings in place at the time of the research as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. A convenience sampling technique was used to recruit six children who were friends and relatives of the researcher’s own children. The group consisted of two 7-year-olds, one 8 year old, two 10 year olds and one 11 year old.

A copy of the pilot study discussion guide is shown in Table 3.5 (below).

Table 3.5 Pilot Study Discussion Guide based on content analysis of child-targeted material and content

Finding	Link to Literature Review	Potential questions to guide workshop discussions
Children’s exposure to contemporary advertising is everywhere in their everyday lives	Advertising literacy Persuasion Knowledge Model Content/Message characteristics of contemporary advertising Format (outdoor/offline/TV/online)	When you think about advertising, what pops into your head? How can you tell that something is advertising? [prompts: are there any signs? N.B. Look for mentions of disclosures cues #ad #sponsored #gifted, format clues] Based on what we’ve just talked about, can you think of any advertisements that you’ve seen recently? [prompts: What makes an advertisement stand out? Where did you see them? Can you think of a time when you’ve seen an advertisement for something online? Follow up: Why do you think that one has stayed in your mind? Follow up: Do you guys see advertisements a lot? Or not? What new trends are you seeing? Can you tell me a bit more about that?
Popular brands with UK children		<i>Potential Task: Graffiti Wall</i> Introduce task: Ok so I have a quick activity to do with you now. I’d like you all to think

	Peer influence	<p>about the term “brand” and what it means to you. I’d like you to choose some pens and then come and write on the Graffiti Wall here. Write what you think a brand is and if you can think of any brands that you know of or that you like write those on the wall too. You can write as much or as little as you like or you can draw something to do with a brand or add a doodle instead. Is everyone OK with that?</p> <p>[N.B. Look for similarities, unusual brands]</p> <p>Follow up: Which of these brands are really popular with kids?</p> <p>Follow up: Why do you think that is?</p> <p>Follow up: How did you hear about [brand]?</p>
	<p>Online brand communications literacy framework (OBC)</p> <p>Processing of commercialised media content model (PCMC)</p>	<p>Online questions</p> <p>Who has access to a mobile device or tablet at home that they use?</p> <p>What sort of things do you use those devices for? (Prompts: [gaming, homework, reading, watching videos, making videos, talking to friends, other])</p> <p>Ok I’ve got some cards here with different apps on them. Can you take a look at them and choose your top five, so the ones that you use most often [note disregard WhatsApp]</p> <p>Which ones have you chosen? Follow up: What sorts of things do you watch on YouTube? [prompts: reviews, gaming walkthroughs, sports, pranks, challenges, ASMR, whole programmes, music videos] Follow up: What sort of things do you watch on TikTok? [prompts: ‘for you’ page suggestions, friends’ accounts]</p> <p>Have any of you seen advertisements on YouTube or TikTok? What do you think about those? [N.B. only ask if not covered in earlier discussion]</p>
In-game advertising and brand placement is prevalent in popular online		<p>If chosen apps are games: How often do you play online games? Follow up: What’s good about playing [game]?</p>

<p>games and apps such as Roblox and Fortnite</p>		<p>Follow up: What don't you like about [game]?</p> <p>Roblox specific follow up: Have any of you bought Robux?</p> <p>Roblox specific follow up: What did you spend your Robux on?</p> <p>Fortnite specific follow up: Have any of you bought Vbucks?</p> <p>Fortnite specific follow up: What did you spend your Vbucks on?</p> <p>Have any of you seen any advertisements in these games? Follow up: Can you tell me a bit more about that? Follow up: What do you think about that/those?</p> <p>Have any of you ever bought anything or asked for anything that you have seen online? Follow up: Can you tell me a bit more about that?</p>
<p>Influencer Marketing is prevalent on YouTube and TikTok</p>	<p>Source characteristics</p> <p>Source credibility theory</p> <p>Parasocial interaction</p>	<p>If you follow channels or people/what sort of things are they/Who are they? Are they adults or kids? [N.B. look for mentions of YouTubers, popular channels, TikTokers etc.]</p> <p>Why do you follow them? What do you like about them? Why? What don't you like about them?</p> <p>If you were given £100, what would you choose to spend it on?</p> <p>Do any of you go shopping with your parents or your friends? Follow up: Where do you go?</p> <p>Do you enjoy shopping? Why or why not?</p> <p>When you go shopping with your parents, do you get to choose what to buy or do you ask them to buy things for you?</p>
<p>Evidence of sales promotions on HFSS food products</p>		<p><i>Value Trolley</i></p> <p>Introduce task: Ok, so I have my giant shopping trolley here, and I want you to fill it</p>

<p>frequently bought by children</p> <p>Evidence of in store point-of-sale displays for HFSS foods that appeal to children</p> <p>Evidence of popular children's characters on HFSS foods packaging</p>		<p>with all the things that you like to spend your money on. It can be absolutely anything you like. I'd like you to write or draw your item on a sticky note and stick it in one of the sections of the trolley. As you can see at this end, we have the everyday items, so things that don't cost a lot of money, and at this end we have space for the more expensive things that you might have to save up for. And then the section in the middle is for everything else. Does that make sense?</p> <p>Ok now that we've filled the trolley, I'm going to go through and ask you to talk about some of the things in here. [N.B. Look for brand mentions, HFSS foods, high value items]</p> <p>Summarise similarities: Lots of you have said [item] why do you want to buy that/those?</p> <p>What sort of things do you think about before you buy something? [prompts: price, discounts, peers, function, style]</p> <p>How do you decide if something is worth buying? Follow up: why is that important to you?</p> <p>Does anyone want to add anything else to the trolley?</p>
	<p>Product characteristics Message Characteristics Source Characteristics</p>	<p>Potential Future Workshop Task preparation question</p> <p>Ok so let's say I worked for [insert brand name based on participants' suggestions on wall] if I wanted to get kids to buy [branded product], how could I persuade them to do that?</p> <p>What would work? Why? What wouldn't work? Why?</p>

(Source: Author's own work)

3.3.4.3 Insights from Pilot Study

The pilot study proved extremely useful for a number of reasons. First, it provided the researcher with the opportunity to refine the questions and proposed creative tasks and

exercises that were planned for the workshops. It became apparent that some of the proposed activities and questions needed some adjustment to better suit the abilities of the younger age group (i.e. the 7- and 8-year-olds). For example, the first question in the draft workshop discussion guide; “*when you think about advertising, what pops into your head?*” prompted a question in response from one participant (age 7) who immediately asked; “*What’s advertising?*”.

On reflection, this question did not necessarily mean that the child did not understand what advertising is, and after a brief explanation about advertising from the researcher in simple terms, it appeared that the child did indeed have some ideas and awareness about advertising and was able to recall some standard characteristics of an advertisement and talk about advertisements he had seen, but simply wanted clarification before responding to the question. However, this question highlighted the importance of having a child-friendly, plain English explanation of advertising prepared in advance of the fieldwork, which would explain to participants what the term ‘advertising’ meant generally, but that would not influence the answers given. The explanation used in the creative workshops is presented below:

“An advertisement is a paid message that tells you something you need to know, persuades you to buy a product, or puts forward a point of view.”

In the pilot study, children were asked to write or draw their responses to the question: “*What does the term brand mean to you?*” onto a roll of pale coloured brick patterned wallpaper. Fortunately, this task required very little explanation, which was reassuring to the researcher. However, the two youngest children in the pilot study wrote less on the ‘wall’ than the older children (i.e. the two 10 year olds and the 11 year old). On reflection, it appeared that the younger children were able to recognise brands that they were aware of and ones that they particularly liked, but they were still developing their writing skills. For example, the researcher was asked a number of times how to spell a certain brand by the younger children. Therefore, the researcher decided that in the upcoming creative workshops it would be useful to have some pre-prepared laminated cards featuring some of the most popular child-targeted brands as revealed by the content analysis work. These would be made available to any participant who might have been less confident in their writing abilities, but the cards would only be given to the children after they had mentioned a brand verbally first, so as not to bias or influence their answers in any way beforehand. This decision was also based on best practice guidance from Livingstone et al., (2016) who suggest that the use of cards with

images or words on them (e.g., pictures of Internet devices, online activities) can be used by children to help them articulate their views in such research. The researcher also questioned if the younger children might have been less familiar with the term 'brand' than the older children, therefore decided to make sure that a brief explanation containing alternative terms such as "make" "shop" "product" and "type of thing" would be incorporated into the verbal introduction of the task in the creative workshops to aid children's understanding.

Questions about the presentation of advertising within applications and on YouTube and TikTok, were met with mixed responses. All of the children in the pilot study were able to recall more obvious forms of online advertising that is present on the platform YouTube for example the pre-roll and mid-roll advertisements for products that are mostly unrelated to the content that is being watched, which break up or interrupt the videos. All of the children reported that they found these types of advertisements annoying, and where possible they would ignore or 'skip' the advertisement if they had the option to do so. Participants also showed reasonable awareness of some of the indicators of this type of advertising, for example, they were able to describe the presence of a timer on screen which indicated that a video was an advertisement. In addition, two of the older children mentioned that the 'play bar' (which shows how long is left to play on a particular video) changes colour to red when the video is an advertisement. However, participants showed little awareness of more covert tactics, such as brand or product placements within the videos themselves. Furthermore, when asked about the type of content they watched on TikTok, the three older children were unsure if they were exposed to any advertising on the platform.

In the pilot study, two of the participants chose to have a go at the YouTube storyboarding task. The researcher had some initial concerns that this task might be too complex for children to complete in detail within the time allowed for the creative workshop, because it required more thinking time and preparation than the packaging design task. Therefore, to address this issue, the researcher developed a worksheet, and some question prompts to accompany the blank storyboard to help children in the future creative workshops to plan their videos. A copy of the worksheet used to accompany this task in the creative workshops can be found in Appendix D.

One of the most positive aspects of the pilot study was the feedback on the Value Trolley exercise, which proved to be popular with all the children involved. It was well received in

terms of being a relatively “easy” activity to participate in. The simple, clear visual of a shopping trolley was easy to comprehend and the task itself needed little explanation from the researcher, which provided reassurance that it would work well with a larger number of participants of mixed ages.

In addition to pilot-testing the materials, the researcher also sought feedback on the proposed creative workshop activities during the development stage of the research from members of the Social Research Association during a training course on ‘Research with Children and Young People’ in March 2021. The researcher also sought feedback on the proposed activities, language and workshop plan from a qualified primary school teacher prior to commencing the fieldwork in September 2021.

3.3.5 Fieldwork Phase 1 - Creative Workshops

Three creative workshops took place in September 2021 at a junior school in England, UK with a total of 41 children who were aged between 9 and 11 years at the time of the research. Workshop One involved 15 children, Workshop Two involved 12 children and Workshop Three involved 14 children. The workshops took place during the normal school day in the children's usual classroom for ICT lessons. The children's regular teacher was present during all of the workshops in order to comply with the conditions of ethical approval for this research.

In all tasks, the children were asked to provide feedback on their designs and were asked by the researcher to explain why they had chosen to include specific messages, colours and symbols. Participants were also asked follow up questions to explore the reasons why they thought that their design/s would appeal to other children of the same age. The designs produced during the workshops were not analysed by the researcher rather the transcriptions of group discussions provided the data for analysis.

3.3.5.1 Graffiti Wall

In all three workshops, the researcher used blank rolls of pale-coloured, brick patterned wallpaper for the Graffiti Wall Task. In line with the procedure used in the pilot study, the researcher first introduced the Graffiti Wall task and asked participants to think about one particular question – “*what does the word brand mean to you?*”.

Participants were supplied with an assortment of coloured pens and encouraged to write, draw or doodle anything that came into their minds when answering this question.

According to UK charity ‘Save The Children’, the Graffiti Wall is a suitable method for use with children and young people of all ages who can write with assistance or independently (Fajerman, Tresender and Connor, 2004). Graffiti Walls been used elsewhere in medical research projects involving children (Mathers, Anderson, McDonald and Chesson, 2010). The Graffiti Wall was considered to be an appropriate task that would allow the researcher to explore children's brand awareness and highlight topics of interest to focus on in the peer interviews. Images 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 have been reproduced with permission from the host school to illustrate this activity.

Image 3.1. Participants adding to the Graffiti Wall in Workshop 1



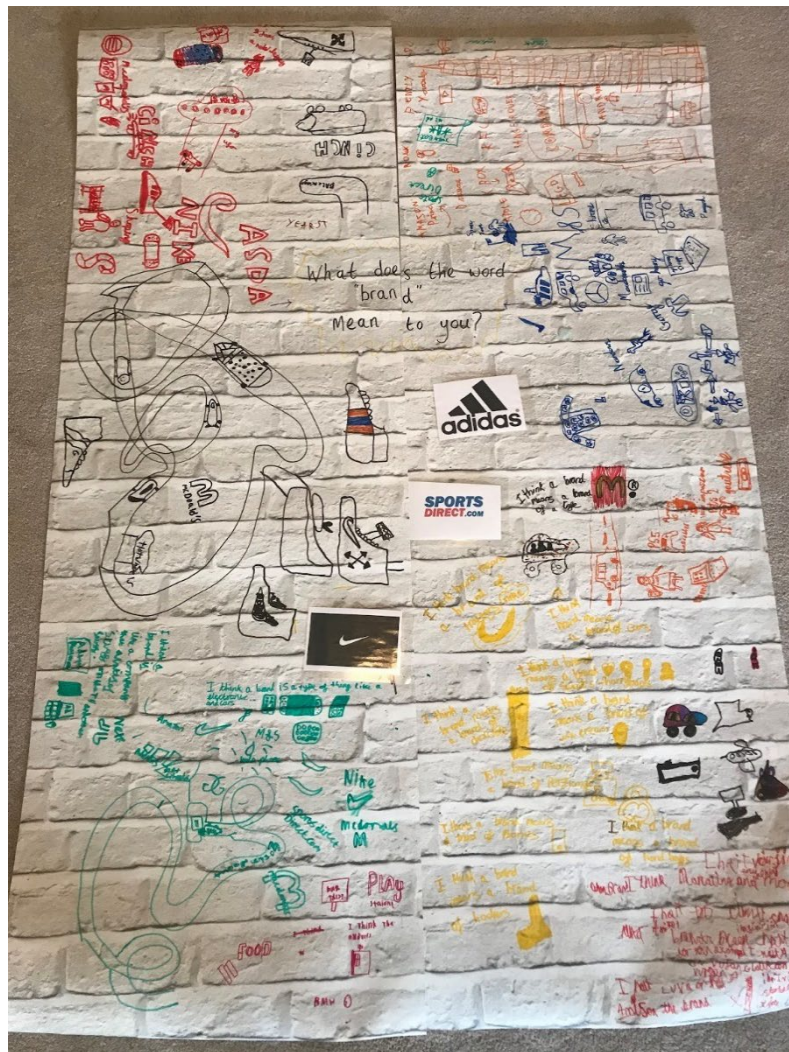
(Source: Author's own photograph)

Image 3.2. Participants adding to the Graffiti Wall in Workshop 2



(Source: Author's own photograph)

Image 3.3 Example of Completed Graffiti Wall from Workshop 3

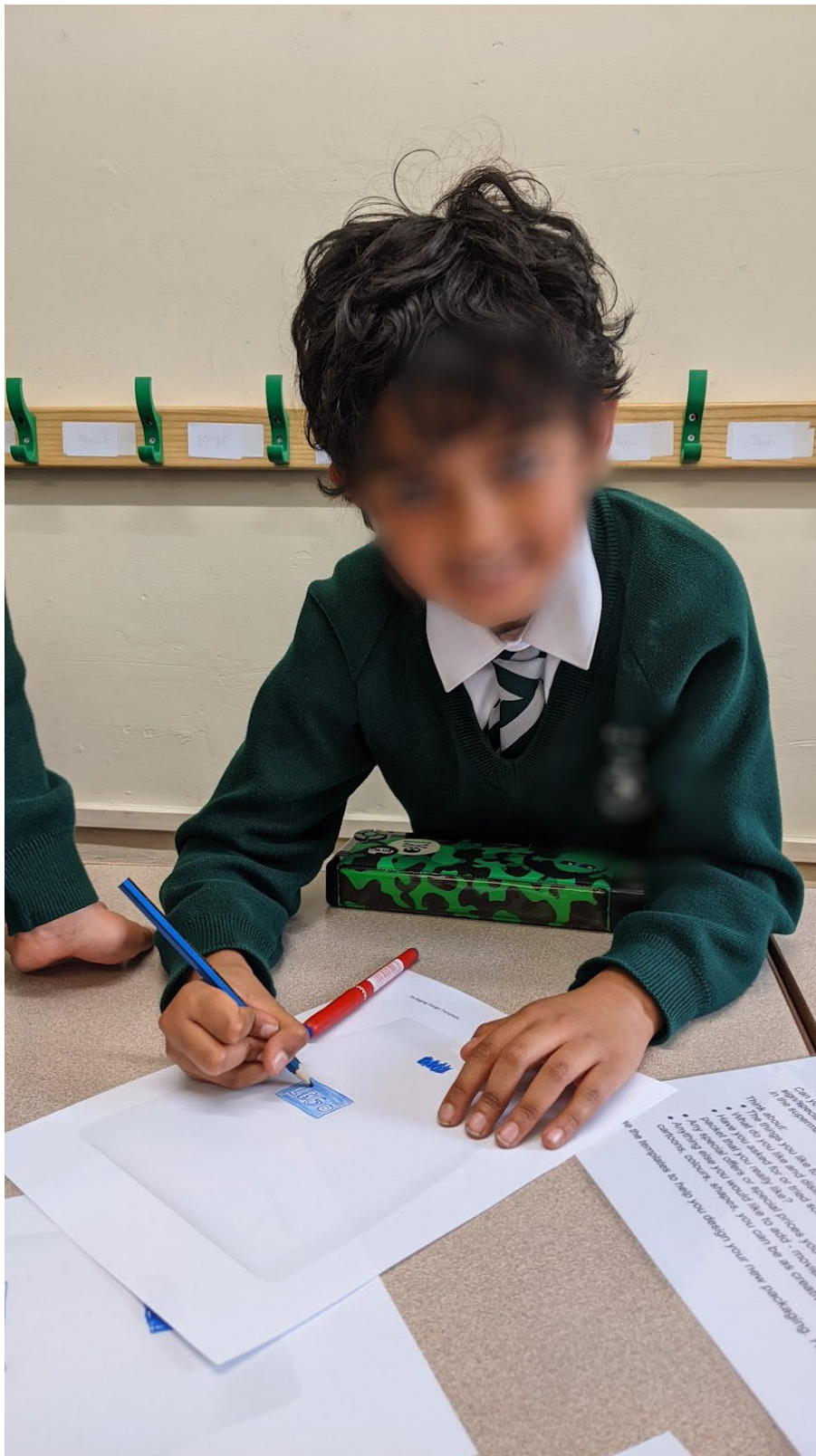


(Source: Author's own photograph)

3.3.5.2 Packaging Design Task

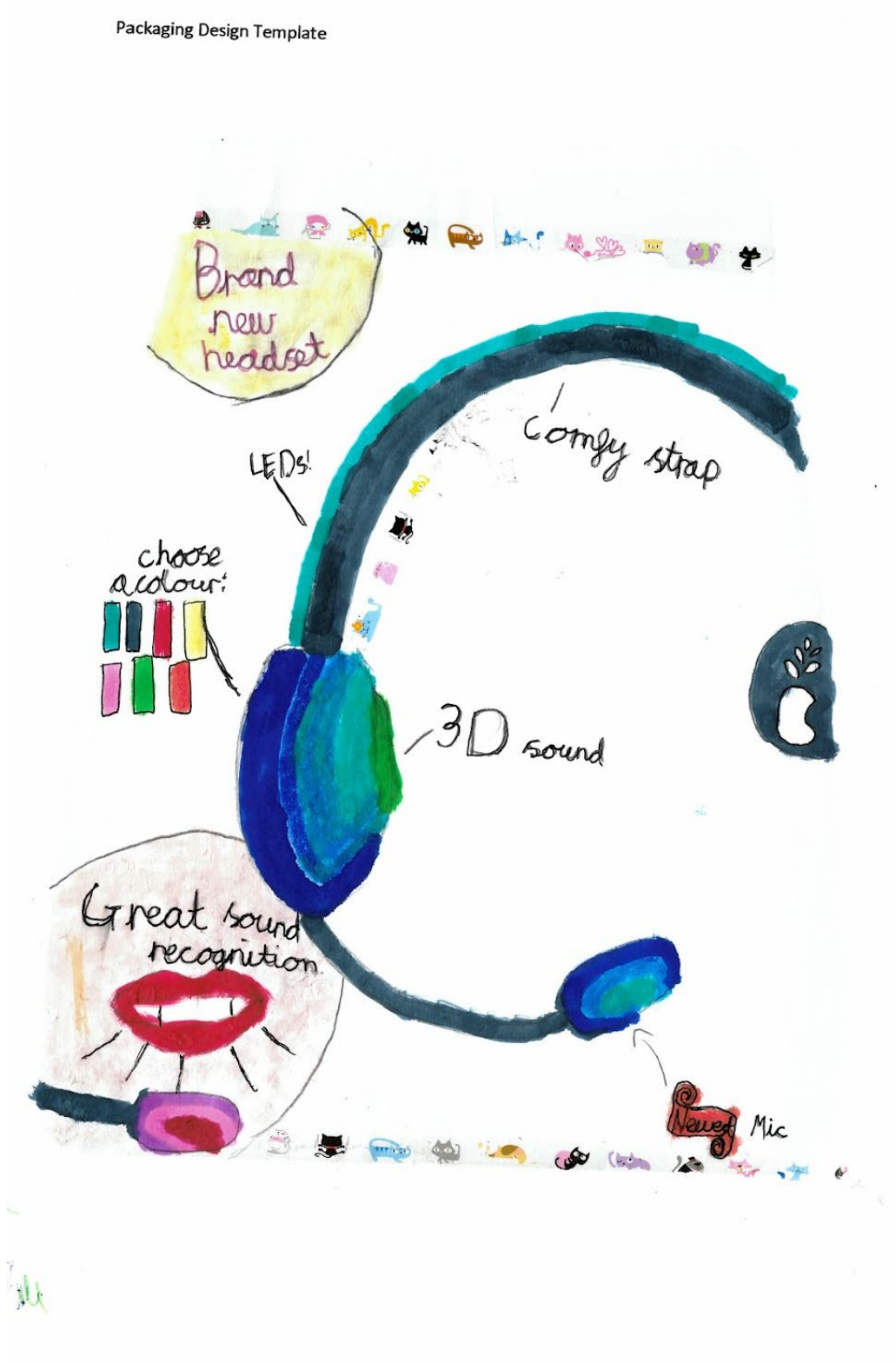
The packaging design task was developed to explore offline marketing, such as point-of-sale and sales promotions with the participants. Participants who opted to complete this task were asked to work in small groups of 3 or 4 children and asked to choose one of the brands that had been written on the Graffiti Wall earlier on in the workshop. This task required children to “*come up with a cool idea for some new packaging or a sign/special offer that would make your chosen product stand out more to kids like you in a supermarket or shop?*” The children who opted to complete this task were given a blank packaging template to draw and write upon to showcase their design. Participants were also given a supplementary worksheet to help them come up with ideas (see Appendix E).

Image 3.4 Participant Completing Packaging Design Task



(Source: Author's own photograph)

Image 3.5 Sample Packaging Design for a Gaming Headset



3.3.5.3 YouTube Video Storyboarding Task

In order to explore children’s perceptions of online marketing on video sharing platforms, the researcher developed a video storyboarding task. Similar to the packaging design task, children who opted to complete this task were asked to work in small groups of 3 or 4 and asked to choose a brand or product written on the Graffiti Wall and “*come up with a cool idea for a YouTube video that would persuade the rest of the class to try or buy the brand/product that you have chosen?*” (see Appendix C). The children who opted to complete this task were given a blank video storyboard and a supplementary worksheet (found in Appendix D) to draw and or write upon to help them plan their video.

Image 3.6 Participants completing YouTube Storyboarding Task



(Source: Author’s own photograph)

3.3.5.4 Value Trolley Task

The fourth task was developed to involve all of the children in the workshops. This task was designed to enable discussions relating to the children's individual spending habits and also facilitate follow up questions regarding how children negotiate spending within their families. The researcher prepared a large board featuring an illustration of a generic shopping trolley. The image of a trolley was chosen as it was considered to be an image that most, if not all, of the children would be familiar with. The trolley was coloured coded into three sections; green, yellow and red as shown in Image 3.7 below.

Image 3.7 Value Trolley



(Source: Author's own photograph)

The researcher explained that the green section was for routine purchases and low value items. The yellow section was for more expensive items that the children might purchase or request less often. The red section of the trolley was for high-value items such as those that children might have to save up money to buy or one-off requests for gifts on special occasions. Children were encouraged to think about the things that they like to spend their

own money on and also about products or services (of all values) that they might request from their parents and caregivers. All participants were given a set of green, yellow and red sticky notes and asked to write or draw items on to the sticky notes. Participants were then encouraged to stick their notes on to the relevant section of the trolley as shown in (Image 3.8). The sticky notes were used as the prompts for follow up questions and discussions between the researcher and the participants.

Image 3.8 Completed Value Trolley



(Source: Author's own photograph)

3.3.6 Fieldwork Phase Two: Peer Interviews

In the second phase of the fieldwork, the researcher returned to the same junior school where the workshops had taken place to conduct semi-structured interviews with 30 children who had taken part in the workshops. Interviews are one of the most common research methods used in interpretive research (Bhattacharjee, 2022). In terms of young participants, such as those involved in this PhD study, Eder and Fingerson (2001, p181) suggest that interviewing can be a useful research method for allowing children to “give voice to their own interpretations and thoughts”. Furthermore, according to Dixon (2015, p2067) interviews help researchers to understand the “lived experience” of participants, which is also an important consideration in interpretivist research.

However, evidence has suggested that interviewing children on their own can make them feel vulnerable (Nairn and Clarke, 2012) so ideally, they should be accompanied by a friend if possible (Eder and Fingerson, 2001). The use of friendship group interviews has also been recommended where the topic under exploration relates to media use (Eder and Fingerson, 2001) and has been used in recent, similar studies (Jones and Glynn, 2019). Therefore, the researcher was keen to accommodate this practice to make the interview process more enjoyable for participants and maintain a child-friendly research methodology. The use of small-group interviews involving two or three participants also minimises the possibility that participants might feel under pressure to provide a “correct answer, as they are able to help each other out and bounce off each other with their answers. This helps to minimise the power imbalance that can exist between a researcher and participants (Eder and Fingerson, 2001) and ultimately allows children to be more natural and authentic in their responses to questions (Nairn and Clarke, 2012).

The peer interviews took place as soon as possible after the initial analysis of data from the workshops had been completed in November 2021, which helped to maintain the momentum of the research and reduce the risk of participants forgetting about or losing interest in the study. The decision was made to only interview older children (i.e. those aged 9 -11 years) based on previous research as discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.2.2), which suggests that these children would have increased maturity and communication skills, thus allowing them to understand more abstract topics, and be able to elaborate more in an interview session than younger children (John, 1999).

The interviews took place in the same school environment as the creative workshops in the participants' usual classroom. As noted earlier, interview topics and questions were guided by the initial analysis of the creative workshop discussions. The interview schedule was semi-structured, to allow for consistency in terms of lines of questioning throughout the group interviews, but also allowed the researcher some flexibility to accommodate topic shifts where necessary and to allow the participants to elaborate on their answers where they wanted to. A full interview schedule can be found in Appendix G, but to provide some additional context for the reader here, participants were asked questions on a variety of topics, including their social media usage (e.g. YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok), their television usage, their awareness of brands, advertising and the media, their perceptions of marketing and advertising materials their opinions of influencers and influencer marketing as well as questions relating to their hobbies, interests and lifestyle such as music, popular culture, and their views on fashion, beauty, sport, toys and games.

All interviews took place within the classroom environment and lasted approximately 25 minutes each. All interviews were conducted and audio-recorded by the researcher. The children's usual ICT teacher was present in a separate area of the classrooms whilst the interviews took place. A total of 12 group interviews involving two or three children in each, were conducted with 30 children. A full list of interview dates and the number of participants in each interview can be found in Table 3.6.

Table 3.6 Interview data

Total participants: 30 aged 10 - 11 years in 12 separate peer group interviews (of twos or threes) lasting approximately 15 - 25 minutes each. Summary stats: Gender split: 16 Male 14 Female Mean age: 10.23 years

Interview Number	Participants	Date	Fieldnotes
1	2 boys aged 10, 11	8th Nov 2021	
2	2 (one boy one girl both aged 10)	8th Nov 2021	
3	2 (one boy aged 10	8th Nov	

	one girl aged 11)	2021	
4	3 (one girl aged 10 and two boys aged 10)	8th Nov 2021	
5	3 (two boys and one girl 10, 11 and 10)	8th Nov 2021	
6	3 (two girls one boy all age 10)	8th Nov 2021	
7	2 (1 girl 1 boy both age 10)	8th Nov 2021	
8	2 (1 girl 1 boy aged 11 and 10)	8th Nov 2021	
9	3 (three boys (aged 10, 10 and 10)	12th Nov 2021	The most difficult interview and the shortest, participants less forthcoming than the other interviewees
10	3 (2 girls 1 boy aged 10, 11 and 10)	12th Nov 2021	
11	3 (2 girls and 1 boy aged 10, 10 and 11)	12th Nov 2021	
12	2 (2 girls aged 11)	12th Nov 2021	TikTok heavy focus, one participant more domineering than the other

(Source: Author's own work).

3.4 Data Analysis

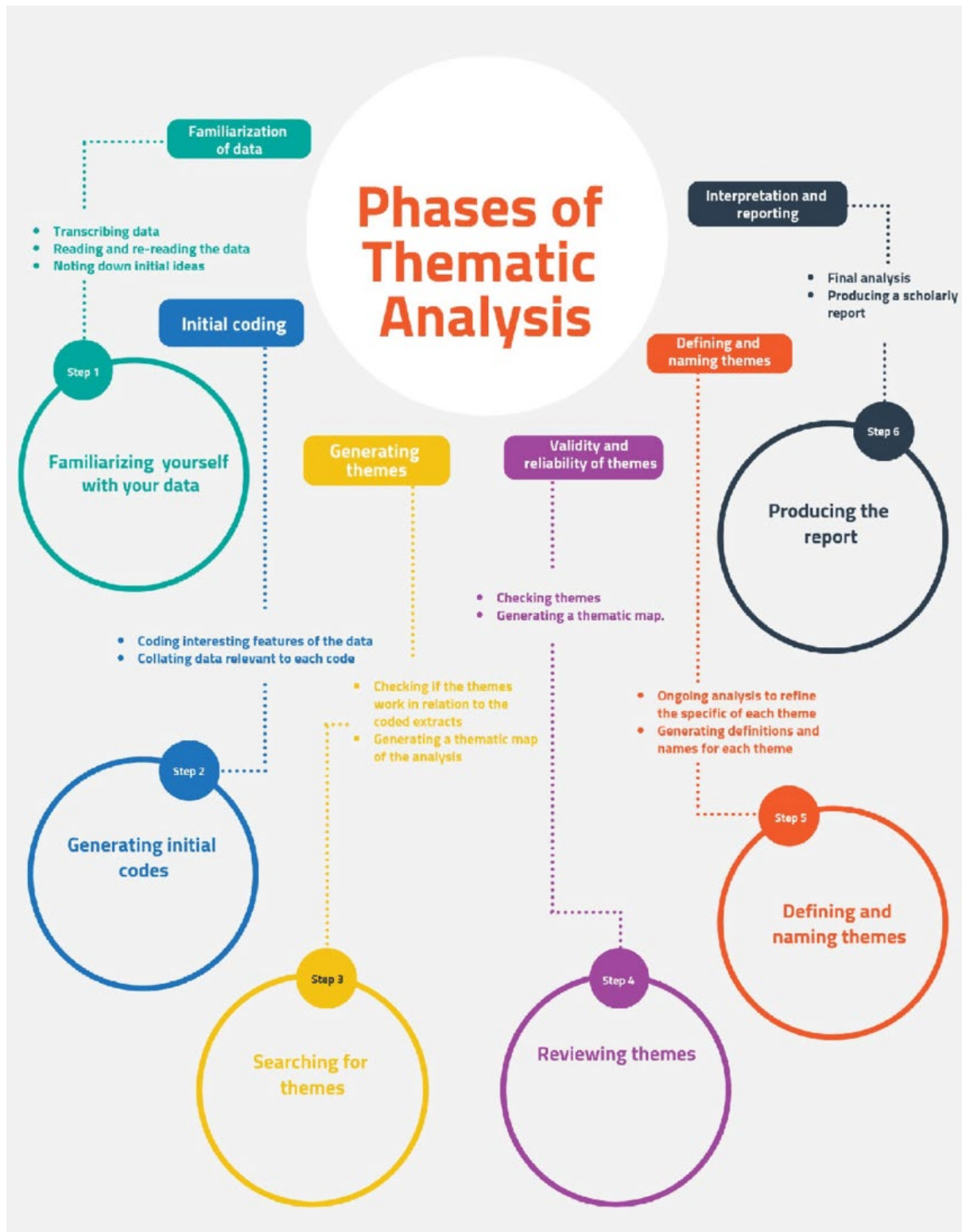
3.4.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Data collected from both phases of the fieldwork was analysed using thematic analysis, which “is considered the most appropriate for any study that seeks to discover using interpretations” (Alhojailan, 2012, p40) as was the case with this research. Thematic analysis allows for the straightforward identification of patterns within large amounts of data, which is typical of qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2019). Despite its apparent popularity as a method, there is no standard way of doing thematic analysis (Drisko and Maschis, 2015). However, the researcher was familiar with the method and chose to follow Braun and Clarke’s (2019) six-step approach to reflexive thematic analysis as they are widely credited as two of the leading authorities on the subject.

The 6 steps are outlined below and illustrated in Image 3.9

1. Familiarisation with the data
2. Generating codes
3. Constructing themes
4. Reviewing potential themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Image 3.9 Phases of Thematic Analysis



(Source: Sendze, 2019).

Details of analysis activities undertaken at each step are provided in Subsections 3.4.1.1 - 3.4.1.5.

3.4.1.1 Step 1 Familiarisation with the Data

The first stage of data analysis consisted of transcription, whereby all workshop group discussions and interviews were audio-transcribed verbatim by the researcher using a denaturalised approach, to emphasise the content of what was said but in a format most like written language (Bucholtz, 2000). Both the creative workshops and interviews were transcribed by the researcher as soon as possible after taking place to help keep the research on track. Despite being a time-consuming process, the researcher made the decision not to outsource the transcription of audio recordings to a third party on the assumption that listening back to the workshops and interviews would prove beneficial in becoming familiar with the data. All transcriptions were printed and analysed in the first instance by hand, whereby the researcher made notes and highlighted points of interest to return to later on.

3.4.1.2 Step 2 Generating codes – 1st and 2nd Cycle Coding

Following transcription, the researcher chose to adopt a similar approach to coding as that undertaken by Lawlor et al., (2016). The reasons for this were twofold. The first being that Lawlor et al., (2016) also conducted a qualitative study from an interpretivist perspective, as is the case with this PhD thesis. The second reason being that the OBC literacy framework developed as a result of the Lawlor et al., (2016) study formed a key component of the conceptual framework underpinning this PhD research. Hence, it was considered to be an appropriate approach to follow. Repetition of actual terms used by participants was tagged with a keyword or phrase to allow for easy identification and further analysis in the 1st cycle of descriptive coding of the data (V1 codebook). These terms were noted across transcripts during initial analysis and given a descriptive or ‘in vivo’ code (Saunders et al., 2020).

In the second cycle of coding, all interview transcripts were compared, and significant “descriptive” terms and significant utterances and passages of text were analysed further to interpret their meanings and given an analytical code. Analytical codes relating to a particular topic were clustered together and grouped into related themes. One of the advantages of a semi-structured approach to data collection (in the form of standardised discussion guides) is that it can make the subsequent analysis more straightforward, which is particularly important for studies with a limited time frame as is the case with a PhD project (Bell, 2009) . It also

allows for consistency of method, which helps to enhance the reliability of qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2020).

3.4.1.2.1 Using Computer-assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS)

Following this, transcriptions were formatted as word documents so that they could be uploaded into the Computer-assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) package NVivo Pro 1.6. The use of CAQDAS has been used in similar qualitative studies (De Pauw, De Wolf, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2017; Jones and Glynn, 2019) and its usage has become more widespread owing to its time-saving properties, which allow researchers to search and explore large amounts of data much more quickly than going through manual transcripts (Bryman, 2012). CAQDAS packages such as NVivo 1.6 also make it easier to organise, code and keep track of large amounts of data as a project progresses, however, it is still the ultimate responsibility of the researcher to analyse and interpret the data appropriately (Saldaña, 2013). Transcriptions were uploaded once they had been analysed by hand. NVivo Pro 1.6 was chosen based on its free availability to students through the University's software centre and because the researcher had undertaken training on how to use the software previously as part of an MA in Social Research.

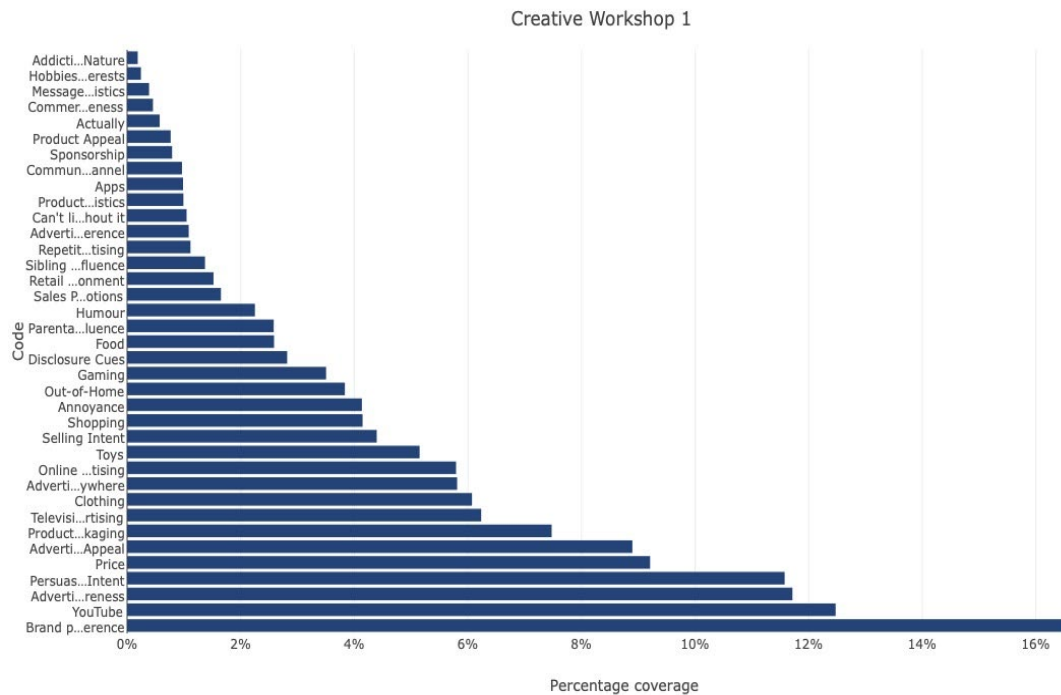
As Braun and Clarke (2019) emphasise, there are no right and wrong codes when it comes to 'doing' thematic analysis in research. In a practical sense, the codes used need to be meaningful to the researcher but one of the most important aspects of qualitative data coding is ensuring that the approach chosen is a) appropriate to the overall analytic purpose of the research, b) the philosophical orientation of the researcher, and c) the study's original research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2019). If close attention is paid to these three aspects, codes should capture the nature of what has been divulged by participants and adequately reflect the researcher's interpretations of this.

Ultimately, the quality of coding should be evaluated on its ability to reflect a thorough and systematic approach (Braun et al., 2018). Thoroughness can be achieved through the researcher's repeated immersion in and often extensive engagement with the data over a long period of time, which in the case of this PhD was several months.

It is also possible to follow a systematic approach in exploratory research as demonstrated throughout this Chapter. The key to success lies in the researcher's ability to develop the system as the research evolves. To illustrate this systematic approach, the following graphs

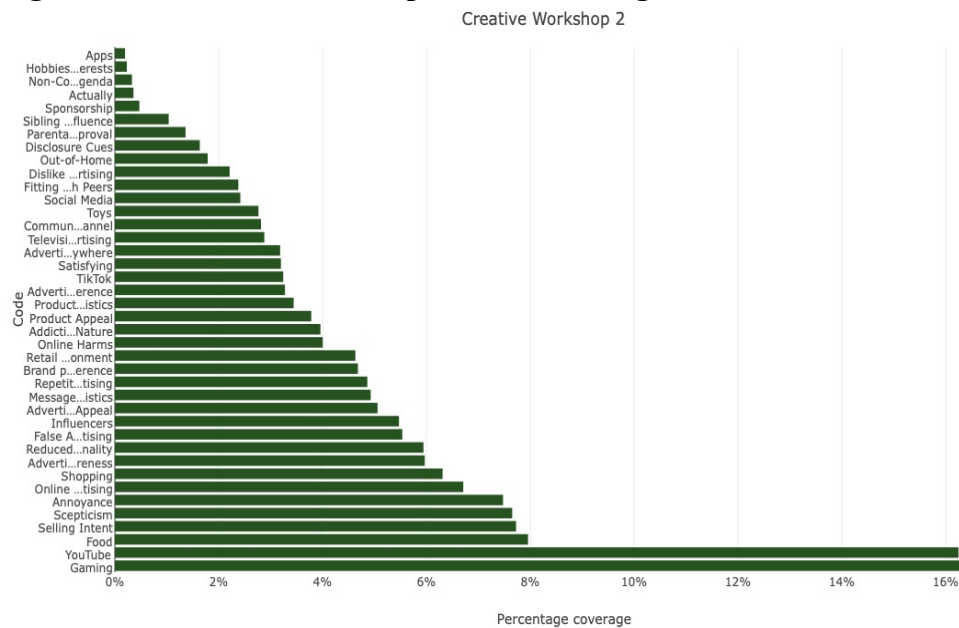
shown in Figures 3.3 - 3.5 were produced in NVivo to illustrate the percentage coverage of all codes following the 3rd cycle of coding of the data collected in Phase 1 (Creative Workshops).

Figure 3.3. Creative Workshop 1 Code Coverage



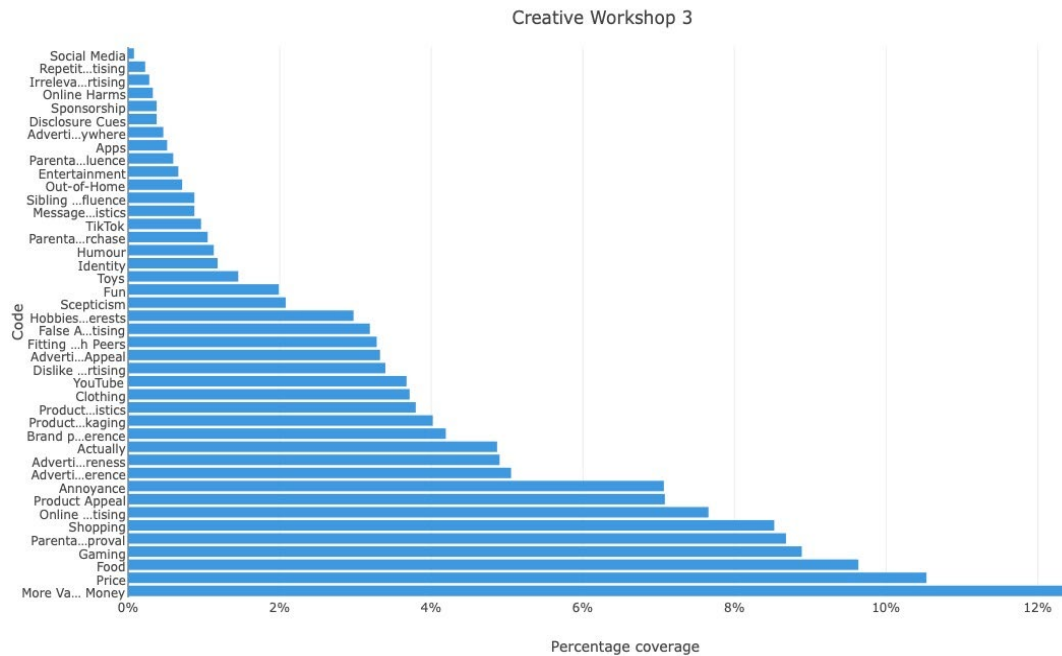
(Source: Author's own work).

Figure 3.4. Creative Workshop 2 Code Coverage



(Source: Author’s own work).

Figure 3.5 Creative Workshop 3 Code Coverage



(Source: Author’s own work).

To illustrate this systematic approach further, Table 3.7 provides some examples of how the researcher moved from descriptive to analytical codes through three coding cycles and the associated amendments made to the data codebook in NVivo.

Table 3.7 Iterative Development of Codebook in NVivo (1st, 2nd and 3rd cycle coding)

Amendments to Codebook from 1- to 2- Cycle coding	Reason for Amendment/s
Commercial Agenda renamed Advertising Awareness	Better suited to the participants responses in the data
Disclosure Cues, Persuasive Intent and Selling Intent grouped under Advertising Awareness	Awareness of Disclosure cues generally illustrated participants awareness of advertising – the two are closely linked
“Eye catching” (in vivo code) renamed Advertising Appeal	Data contained more references to advertising appeal than “eye catching” – “eye catching” coded in first workshop transcript but not

	sufficiently mentioned frequently enough in future workshops transcripts to warrant its own code)
Informational Intent renamed Information-seeking	On reflection, references seemed to be less about awareness of the purpose of the communication and more about the participants' own behaviour and motivations
Instagram/Snapchat/WhatsApp grouped under Social Media	These three platforms not mentioned frequently enough in data to warrant own code
Making things look better than they are renamed False Advertising	Analysis revealed that this concept was linked to scepticism but also to advertisement techniques and message characteristics – but not always false advertising, it was a useful code to find quotes in NVivo but didn't adequately reflect all of the topics discussed under this code
Product Desire renamed Product Appeal	Analysis revealed that references coded here related less to a child's 'desire' for the product and more about the 'appeal' of the product (e.g. its features)
Social Interaction with Friends renamed Social Interaction	References did not always pertain to friends explicitly (sometimes it was siblings, cousins, classmates, parents, other players on games etc.)
Amendments from 2- Cycle coding to 3- Cycle	Reason for Amendment/s
More value for your money added as an analytical code	More appropriate
“Actually” added as a descriptive code	(real life vs. advertising portrayal, expectations, experience)
Codes amalgamated into parent (overarching) and child (sub themes) codes	To facilitate theme development and to make it easier to identify overarching concepts and related sub themes and find relevant passages of transcription more quickly

(Source: Author's own work).

At the end of this process, the researcher also added supplementary field notes from her research diary to the paper copies of the printed transcriptions to aid analysis later on. These handwritten notes were subsequently transferred into the CAQDAS software package; NVivo, and can be found as a list of 'Annotations' in Appendix I.

3.4.1.3 Step 3 – Constructing Themes

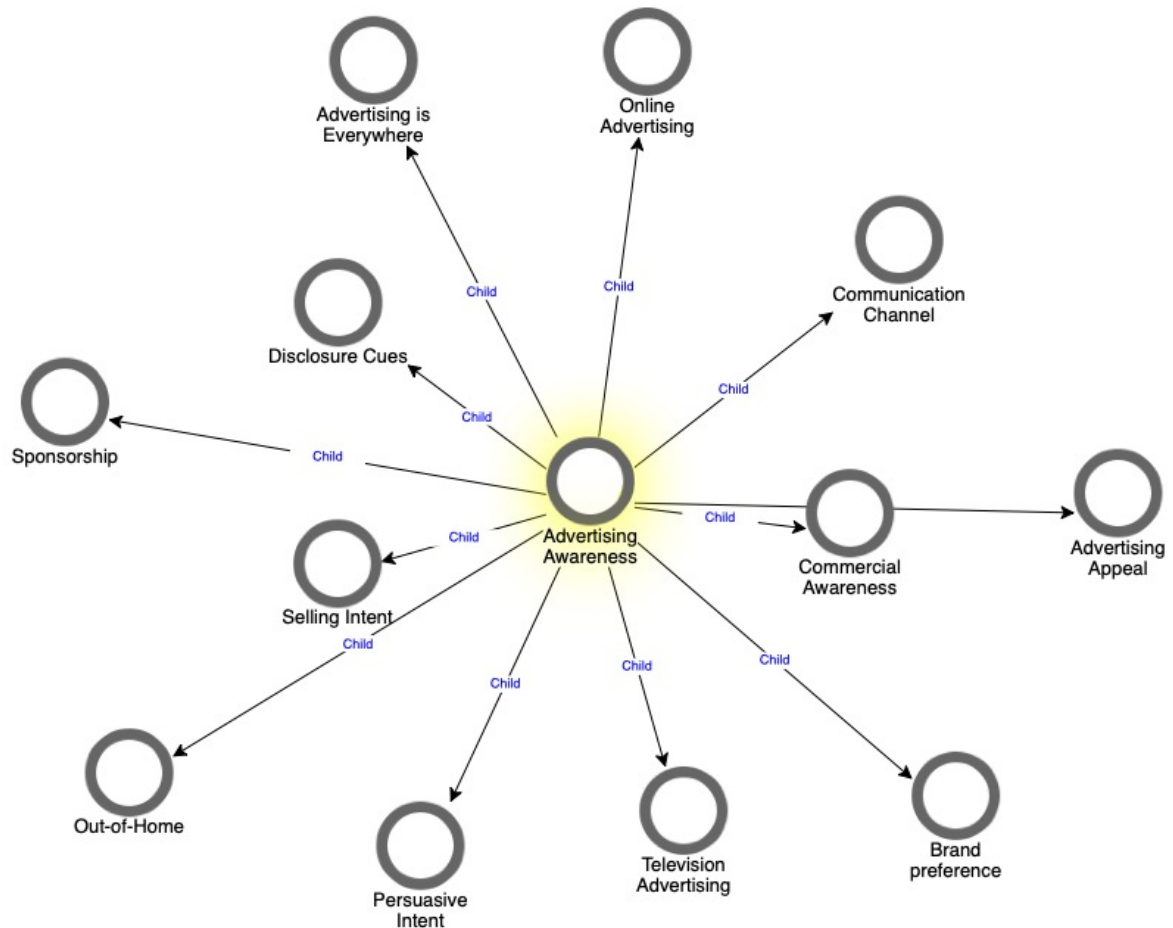
Regardless of research topic, most theme development involves breaking transcriptions down into smaller units of text and the subsequent “analytical examination of narrations related to social phenomena” (Vaismoradi and Snelgrove, 2019, p4). Themes are produced by organising codes around a relative core commonality, or ‘central organising concept’, that the researcher interprets from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). In this research, significant analytical codes were noted across transcripts, which were then compared (Lawlor et al., 2016). Commonalities and patterns that emerged from the analytical coding of the data were grouped together into possible, related “Themes” (Saunders et al., 2020) .

To illustrate this process, the following figures have been taken from the NVivo 1.6 analysis, which were generated by the significant codes identified within the data (across three cycles of coding of phase one and two data). These figures help to show how these raw components form the basis of each of the three main themes within the findings. In the interests of succinctness, only the most relevant diagrams are included here (i.e. those generated in NVivo post 3rd cycle coding).

These figures are included to provide a visual representation to aid the reader’s understanding as to how the researcher made the journey from A to B. In other words, exactly how and why various inferential processes were used to analyse, interpret and connect the end product of research (i.e. the findings) to the data, and explain how the themes were constructed and refined based on each cycle of coding. These diagrams act as a precursor to the following Chapter (Chapter 4 – Findings) which concentrates on extracting and analysing the most significant findings in each of the three themes.

Figure 3.6 illustrates the overarching ‘parent’ code; Advertising Awareness and its related ‘child’ codes, which were fundamental in the construction of Theme One: The Omnipresence of Omnichannel Advertising.

Figure 3.6 Analytical Code: “Advertising Awareness”



(Source: Author’s own work).

Descriptive codes (shown as “child” codes in Figure 3.6)

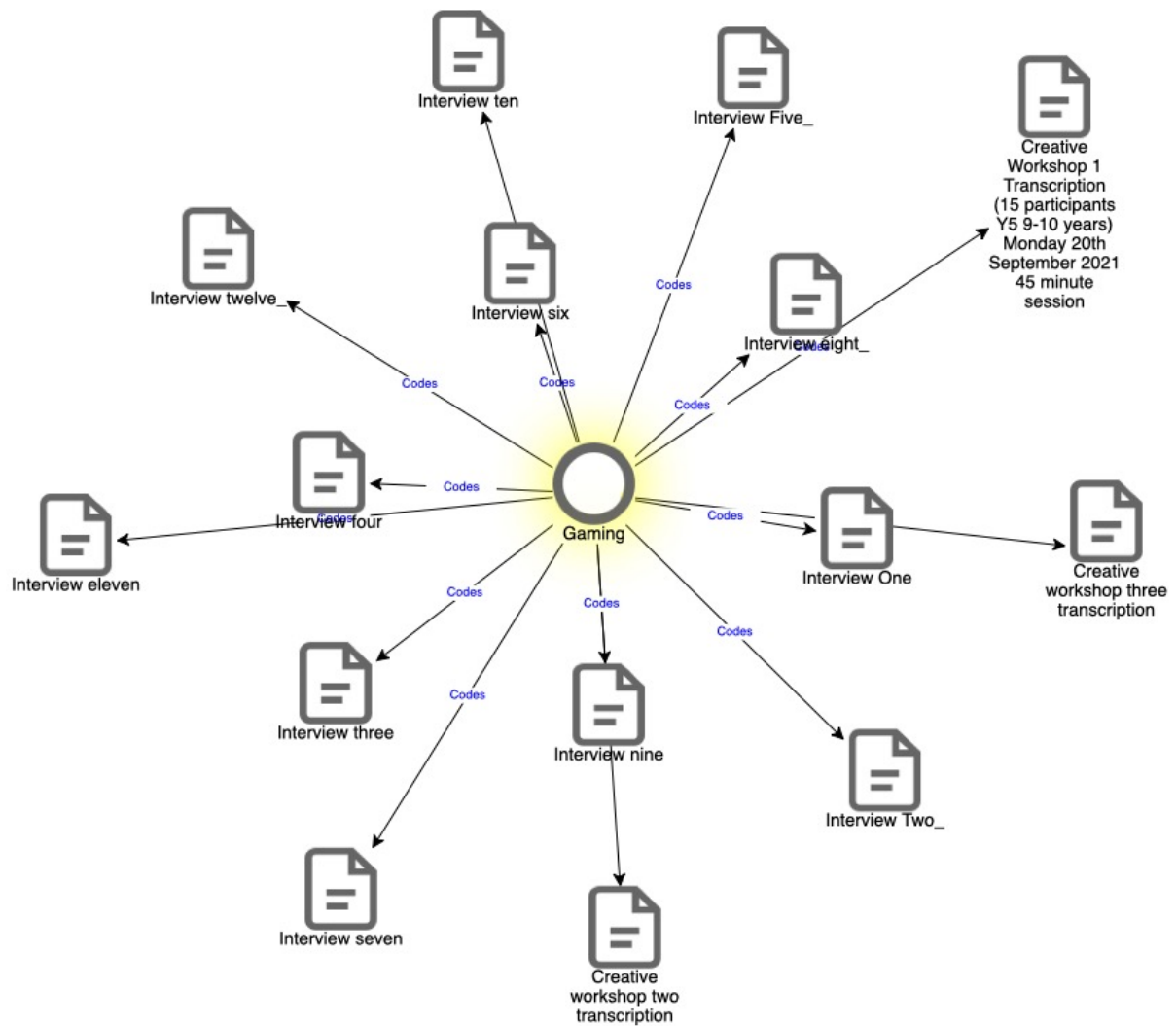
- Disclosure Cues
- Persuasive Intent
- Selling Intent
- Advertising is everywhere
- Communication Channel
- Advertising Appeal
- Sponsorship
- Out-of-home
- Television Advertising
- Brand Preference

- Commercial Awareness
- Online Advertising
 - Online Harms

From a different perspective, Figure 3.7. illustrates the coverage of the Descriptive code “Gaming”, highlighting its prominence across the creative workshops (Phase 1) and interviews (Phase 2).

This code was instrumental in developing Theme Two; Marketing's role in children’s lifestyle and identity formation.

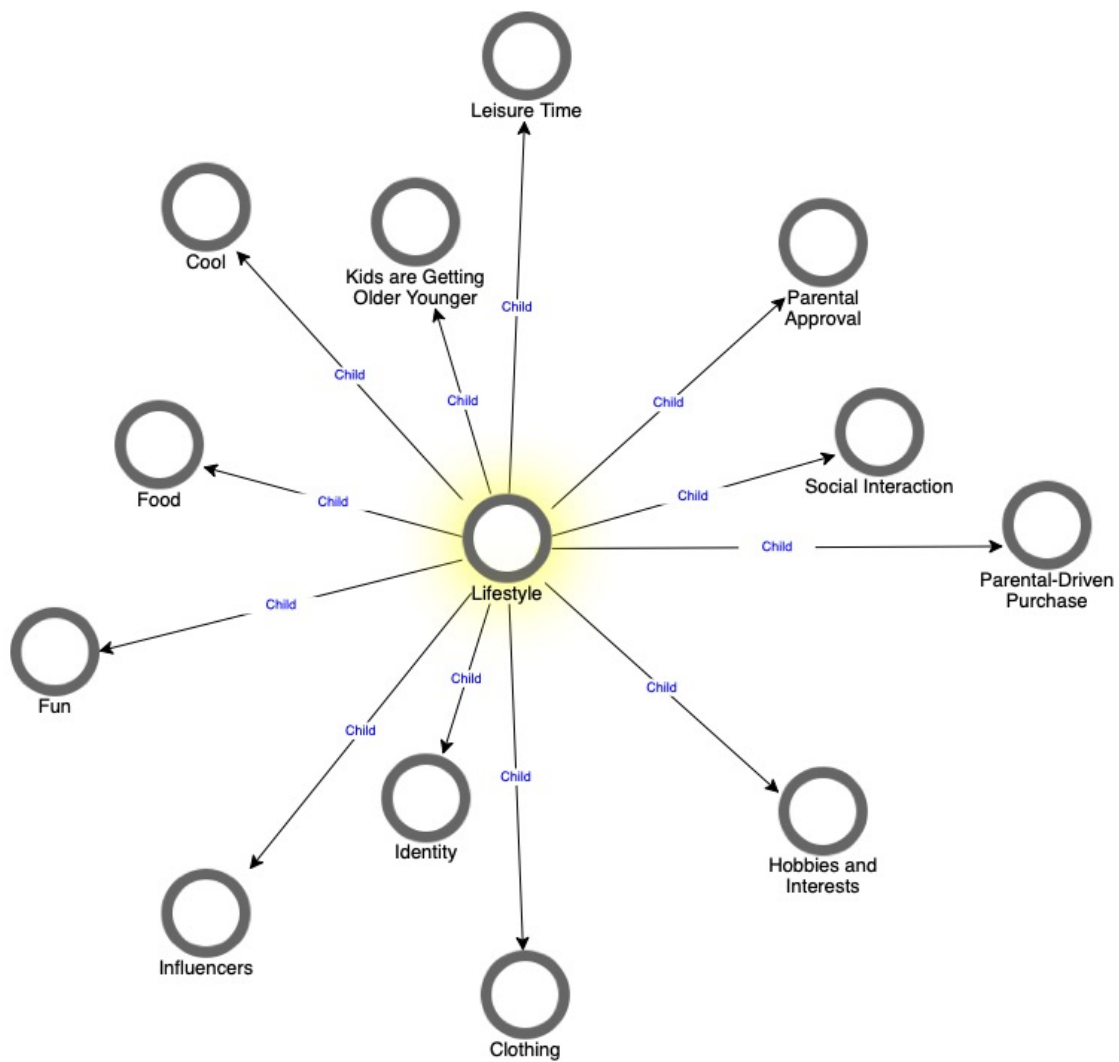
Figure 3.7 Prominence and coverage of “Gaming” across both data sets from Phase 1 and Phase 2.



(Source: Author's own work).

Figure 3.8 demonstrates the whole picture of the 2nd theme based on all of its significant underlying codes. This overarching analytical code; "Lifestyle" was later refined into Theme Two: Marketing's role in children's lifestyle and identity formation.

Figure 3.8 Lifestyle



(Source: Author's own work).

Analytical Code: Lifestyle

Descriptive codes:

- Leisure Time
- Parental Approval
- Parental-driven purchase
- Hobbies and Interests
 - Toys
 - Watching Television
 - Social Media
 - Instagram
 - Snapchat
 - YouTube
 - TikTok
 - Gaming

- In-game purchase
- Entertainment
 - Satisfying
- Electronic Devices
 - Addictive Nature
 - Apps

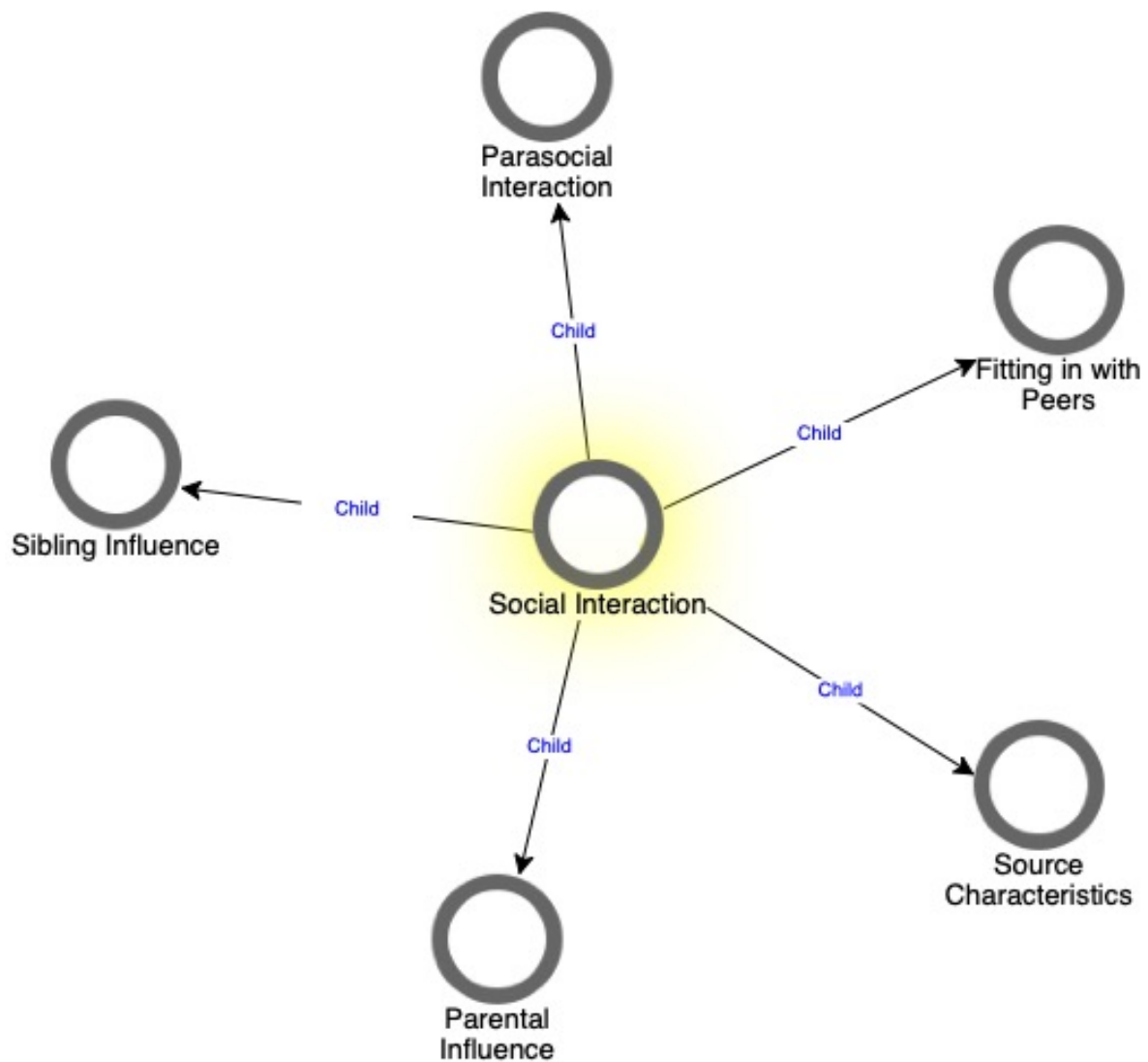
3.4.1.4 Step 4 - Refining Themes

The fourth step in the thematic analysis process is to refine initial themes by deep diving into the data set. This is the stage where unsubstantiated codes and ideas can be set aside or amended. At this stage, the researcher will attempt to confirm that the themes accurately represent the story being told by the data. It is also important at this stage to decide what should be considered a main theme and what is better understood as a subtheme.

For example, when developing the second theme; **Marketing's role in children's lifestyle and identity formation**, there was strong evidence to indicate that the code; "Social Interaction with Friends" should be amended to "Social Interaction" as shown in Table 3.7. This refinement was based on the fact that participants' references in the data did not always pertain to their friends explicitly (sometimes they were talking about their siblings, cousins, classmates, parents, and/or other players on online games). Furthermore, there was a question regarding "Social Interaction" and whether it should represent its own theme. Despite this, "Social Interaction", eventually became a subtheme with its own underlying components within Theme Two.

Figure 3.9 shows the intricacies involved in the construction of this analytical code; "Social Interaction" based on 2 cycles of data coding.

Figure 3.9 Social Interaction Subtheme



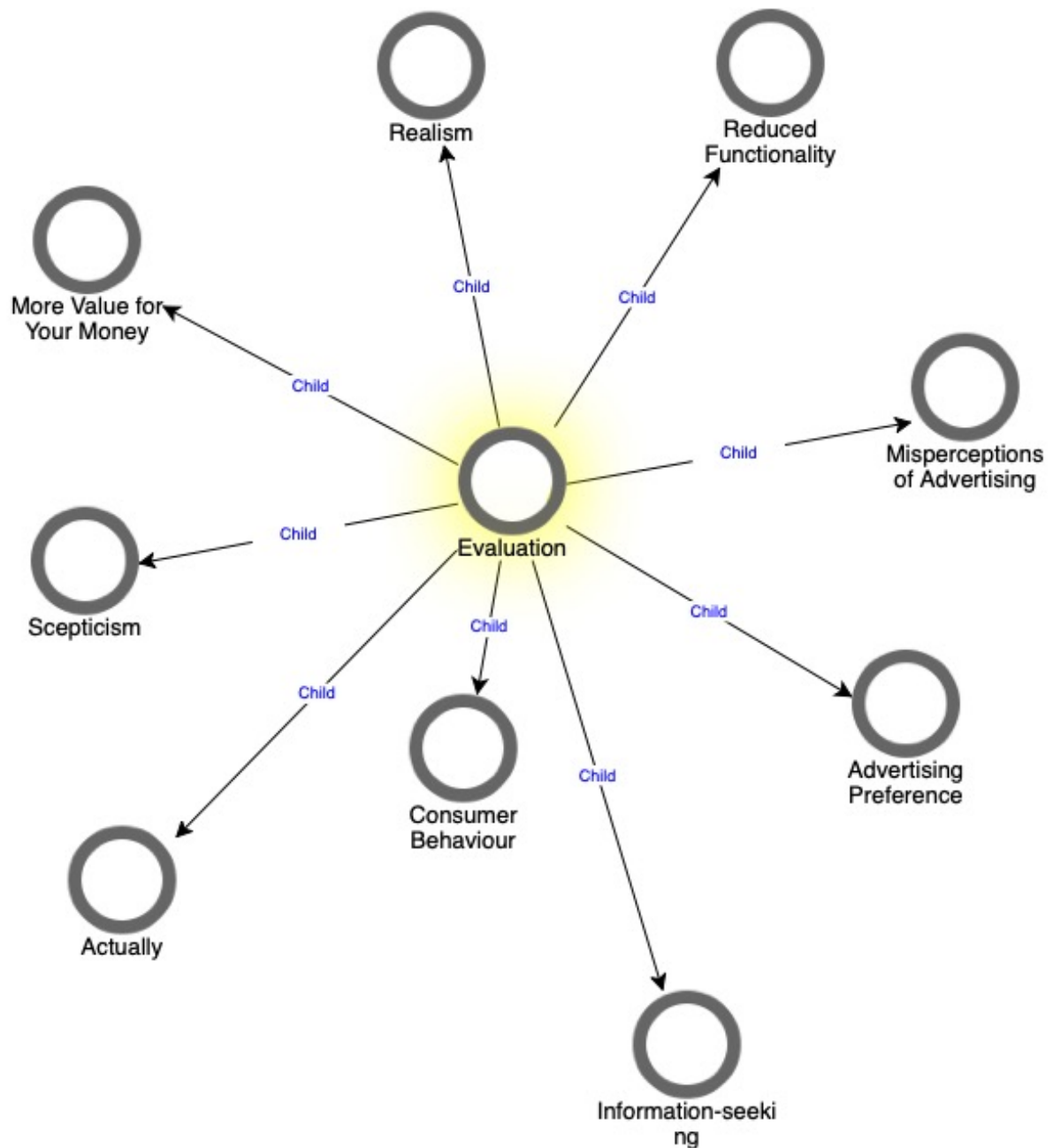
(Source: Author's own work).

Descriptive/ Child codes:

- Sibling Influence
- Parental Influence
- Fitting in with Peers
- Parasocial Interaction
- Source Characteristics
 - Authenticity
 - Similarity
 - Congruence

Lastly, Figure 3.10 illustrates how Theme Three: Children's Evaluation of Advertising has been constructed.

Figure 3.10 Visualisation of the Analytical Code; Evaluation



(Source: Author's own work).

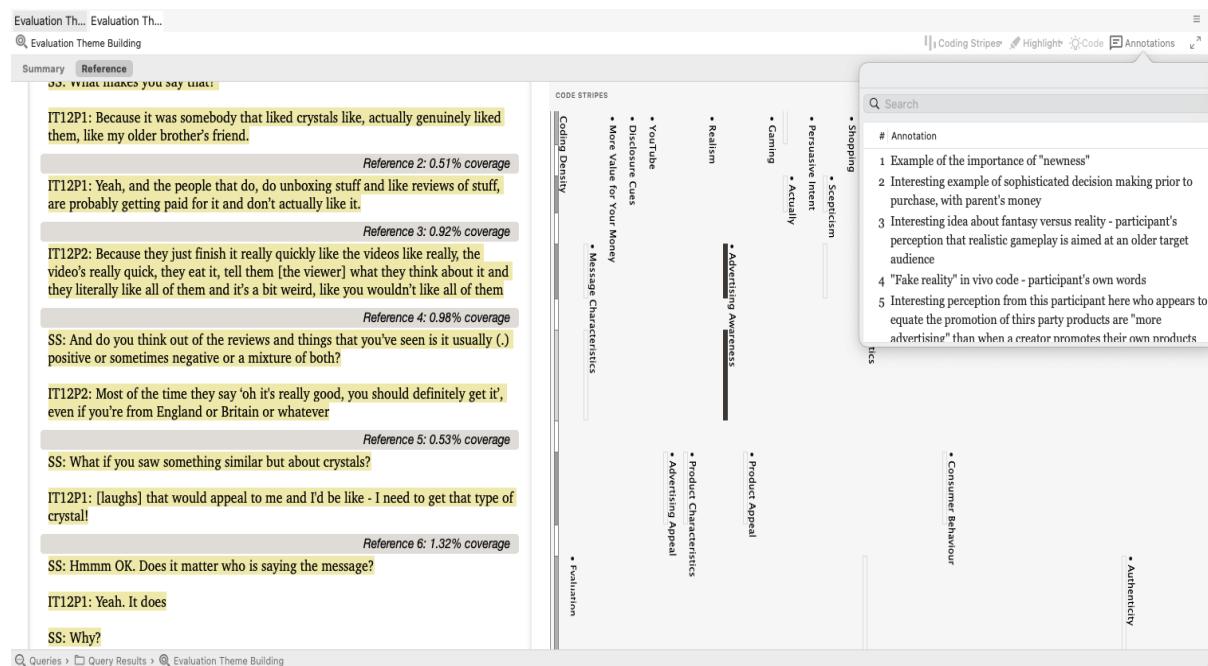
Descriptive codes:

- Scepticism
- More Value for Your Money
- Actually

- Consumer Behaviour
- Information-seeking
- Misperceptions of Advertising
- Reduced Functionality
- Realism
- Advertising Preference

In addition to conducting a first line analysis of all transcriptions by hand, the researcher was keen to complement this more ‘old fashioned’ approach with contemporary technology as well. Figure 3.11 demonstrates how NVivo can assist qualitative researchers in building their themes. Figure 3.11 specifically relates to the third theme; *Evaluation*, but this figure shows the ease with which a researcher can illustrate the development of their themes, based on an analysis of (L-R) participants’ quotes, code coverage and fieldnotes (represented as ‘annotations’ see Appendix I).

Figure 3.11 Theme Building within NVivo 1.6



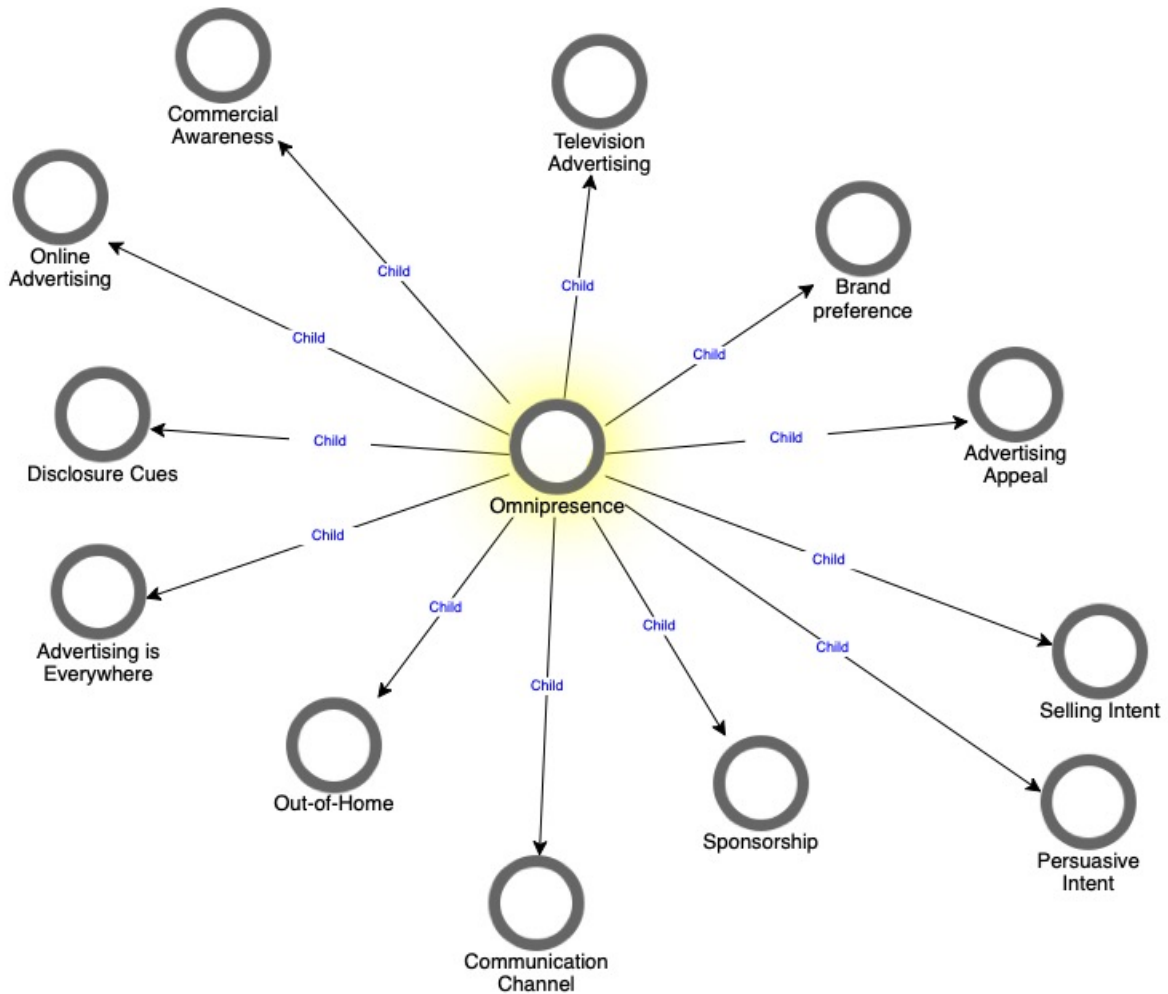
(Source: Author’s own work).

3.5.1.5 Step 5 - Defining and Naming themes

During the data analysis process, it appeared that there were clear patterns emerging in terms of analytical codes, and the linkages between the descriptive codes contained within them.

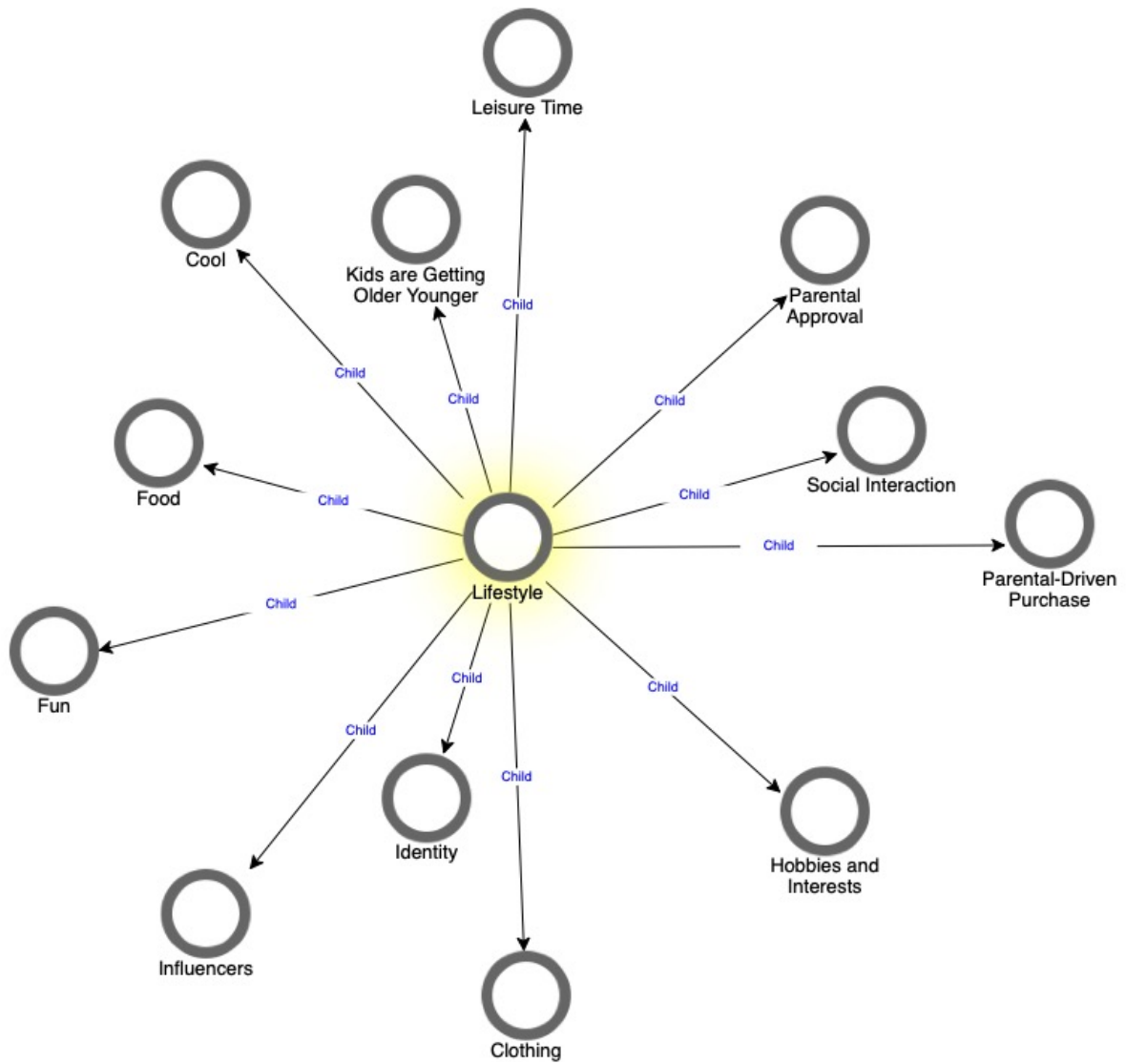
The most significant of these ‘patterns’ formed the basis of three overarching categories, which were refined into the three main themes of organisation for the findings of this research. These three themes are only introduced briefly here, purely to demonstrate the outcome of data analysis. However, they are explained in much more detail in the following Chapter (Chapter 4.0 Findings).

Figure 3.12 Theme One - *The Omnipresence of Omnichannel Advertising*



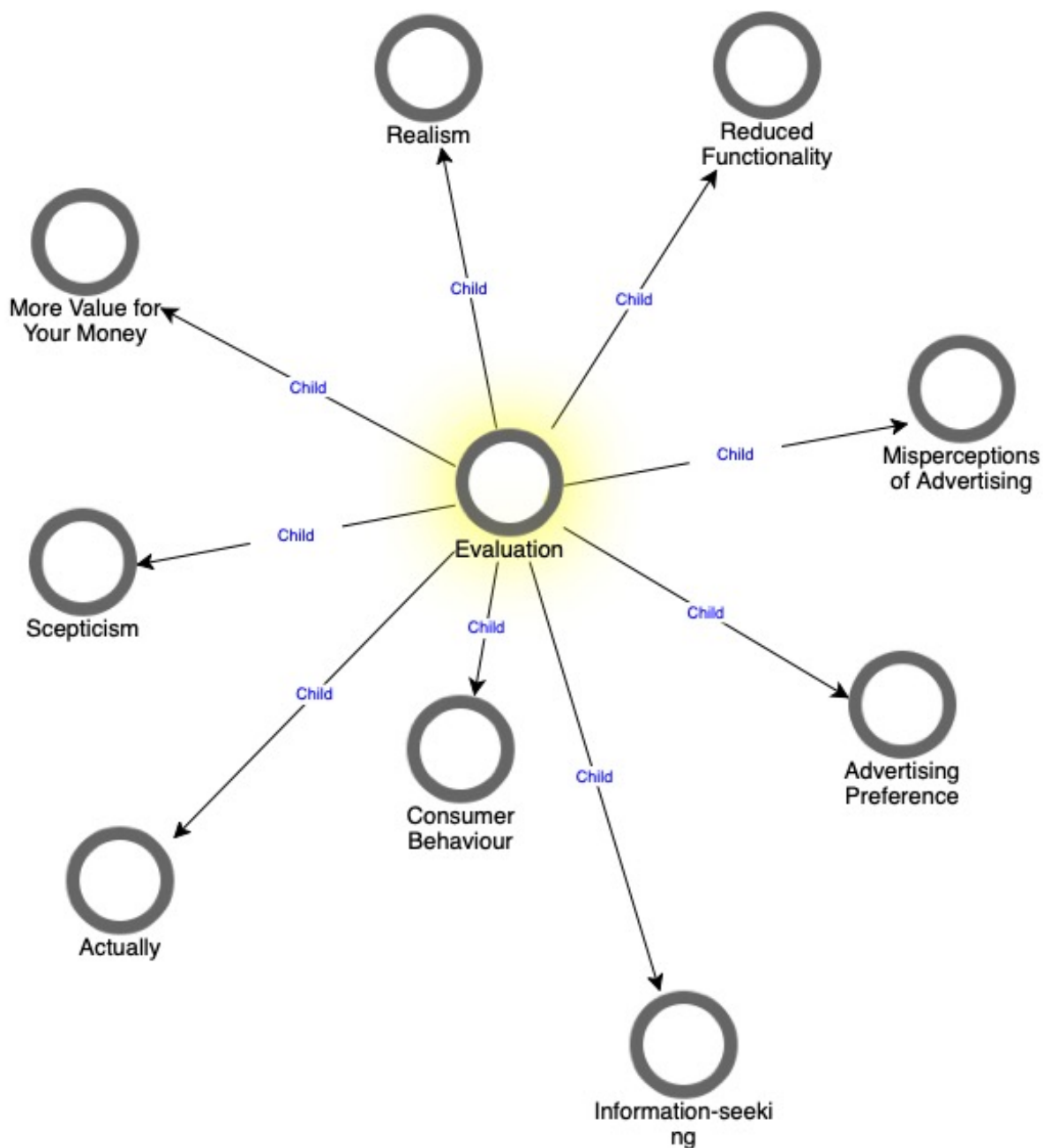
(Source: Author’s own work).

Figure 3.13 Theme Two - *Marketing's Role in Children's Lifestyle and Identity Formation*



(Source: Author's own work).

Figure 3.14 Theme Three - *Children's Evaluation of Advertising*



(Source: Author's own work).

It is important to note that these three themes did not pre-exist “in” the data, They should be understood as the “analytic outputs” of this PhD research in line with the approach to thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019, p594) and followed here.

Data analysis was considered to be a creative rather than a technical process, “developed through and from the creative labour of ... coding” (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p594). In addition, because thematic analysis requires repeated engagement with the entire dataset, findings from both phases have been synthesised to construct all three key themes. As such, the themes presented in this research should be viewed as the result of the researcher’s engagement with the dataset and the application of their analytical skills (Braun and Clarke, 2019). In terms of significance, one way that this was ascertained was by prevalence of a concept, notion or idea across the dataset. For example, the theoretical saturation of the descriptive code “Gaming” (as illustrated in Figure 3.7) certainly indicated its prevalence as a preferred activity in the lives of participants yet required further analysis to understand its theoretical importance and potential links with advertising literacy.

3.4.1.6 Step 6 - Producing the Report

These themes provide the basis of relevant, creative insights sought by the research questions (Vaismoradi and Snelgrove, 2019) and as such are discussed in depth in the following Chapter (Chapter 4) of this thesis. This aligns with the final step of reflexive thematic analysis, which is ‘producing the report’ (Braun and Clarke, 2019) or in this case writing up the research.

3.5 Ethical considerations

As this PhD research involved working with children there were a number of ethical issues to consider. The most important issues are outlined in this section.

3.5.1 Participant Wellbeing

Researchers have a duty of care to protect the participants who are involved in research. Hence, the researcher was careful to adhere to all Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) guidelines to ensure that children were protected from any potential harm or exploitation as a result of taking part in this project. In order to comply with primary schools' safeguarding criteria, the researcher attended a specific safeguarding induction at the school in September 2021. The researcher also obtained an enhanced disclosure from the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) prior to commencing the research project. This is in line with ESRC (2019) guidelines on working with children and is always a requirement for gaining access to schools and pupils for the purposes of research. A current enhanced DBS disclosure provided additional reassurance to the school and parents/guardians of the participants regarding the safety of pupils taking part in the research.

The researcher also acknowledged that children may be eager to please the adult in charge (i.e. the researcher) and may not show any obvious signs of distress, even if they no longer wish to take part in the session. Therefore, the researcher strived to be sensitive "to the moment" (Mukherji and Albon, 2015, p46) and make the most of the expertise available within the primary school environment, such as the participants' teacher who had greater knowledge of the children in that setting and would be quick to notice any changes in a child's behaviour that could signal that they are uncomfortable with the research (Mukherji and Albon, 2015).

3.5.2 Prevent Emotional Harm

Following a fieldwork risk assessment, the nature of the research was considered unlikely to cause distress to participants because the subject matter consisted of age-appropriate commercial or educational material that was representative of that to which children are exposed in their everyday lives. Participants were asked their opinions on a variety of topics as part of this research. According to Nairn and Clarke (2012, p183) researchers should exercise caution when asking children how they "feel" about a particular subject because "exploring children's emotions might bring up areas that are difficult for them". This risk was

minimised in three ways. Firstly, the researcher ensured that the workshop sessions were fun and engaging, and tasks were carefully crafted to ensure that they were suitable for primary school children. Secondly, all group discussions, exercises and interviews were kept relatively short, lasting no more than 25 minutes each to maintain optimum levels of interest from children. The researcher was also mindful to adopt a conversational, friendly interview technique to make children feel more comfortable during interviews. In line with previous research, participants were familiar with each other, which was also considered to make them feel more relaxed (De Pauw et al., 2017). Finally, all participants were given the right to withdraw from the research at any time without question or consequence. As Nairn and Clarke, (2012, p186) stress, “[c]hildren need to know that above all else, nothing bad will happen if they do not want to take part in research”. The researcher also worked closely with the class teacher to ensure that no child was forced to take part in the research against their will, even if they had already given consent. Participation was not incentivised, although the researcher discussed making a donation to the school, which was declined. Instead, the school was happy to receive a short report of the findings to acknowledge their contribution to the study.

3.5.3 Informed Consent

In terms of obtaining informed consent from young participants, the ESRC guidelines stipulate that researchers “should not assume that children are necessarily vulnerable or incapable of giving consent because of their age” (ESRC, 2019, n.p). Therefore, children were asked directly to give their consent to participate in the study. Good practice also suggests that in addition to obtaining informed consent from children, permission should also be sought from a responsible adult (ESRC, 2019). Therefore, the researcher obtained informed consent from all participants and their parents/guardians prior to their involvement in the research by way of a consent form. This consent was confirmed by way of an age-appropriate information sheet, and a face-to-face briefing in accordance with the University of Sheffield’s guidelines for ethical research.

3.5.4 Confidentiality

Participants were anonymised with the use of codes throughout the research process to ensure that there is no possibility of identification of any participant from the data (Bell, 2009) even if data is to be shared for publication at a later date (Bickman and Rog, 1998). The exception to this is the inclusion of photographic images taken by the researcher during the fieldwork,

for which separate permission was requested and granted by those involved. However, these have been pixelated and any references to the host school obscured (e.g. logos on uniform) to ensure participants' anonymity.

3.5.5 Potential Inconvenience

The researcher acknowledges that there was the potential to cause some inconvenience to the host school in terms of the fieldwork. The researcher managed this by ensuring that the time commitment required from the school was minimal, and by taking full responsibility for the organisation of the creative workshops and peer interviews. The researcher also met with key members of school staff to introduce the project, answer any questions and alleviate any concerns. The researcher provided all of the research materials, including information sheets and consent forms and worked in partnership with the schools' ICT teacher to ensure these were distributed and completed by participants and their parents/guardians.

3.5.6 Data Protection

All data and documents relating to the proposed project (including any audio or visual recordings, transcripts and written material from the workshops) has been stored securely on a password-protected hard drive. In addition, data and definitive project documentation will be stored on centrally provisioned University of Sheffield research data storage infrastructure throughout the lifetime of the project. The researcher will keep all data for the minimum required period of time stipulated by both the University of Sheffield and the project funder (ESRC) following completion of the project in 2023.

3.5.7 Data Sharing

Finally, where the contents of this PhD thesis lead to publication, the raw data may need to be shared (i.e. with a journal editor) to check its veracity (Bickman and Rog, 1998) or with other researchers wishing to replicate aspects of the study. To account for this eventuality, a data-sharing clause was included in the project's consent forms, yet as children are unlikely to understand exactly what this means, parental/caregiver consent to the use of data for publication and future public engagement work was also sought for this purpose on behalf of all participants. Again, this is in line with previous research (i.e. Lawlor et al., 2016; Jones and Glynn, 2019).

3.6 Summary of Methodology Chapter

This Chapter has sought to explain exactly how and why various inferential processes were used to analyse, interpret and connect the end product of research (i.e. the findings) to the data, and in doing so, demonstrate a robust and scientifically rigorous methodological approach to qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2020). The specific methodological contributions of this thesis are discussed later on in Chapter 5 (Section 5.4) and the limitations of the study design are considered in Chapter 6 (Section 6.6).

Chapter 4.0 Findings

4.1 Introduction

This Chapter presents the main findings from this PhD research. As outlined in the previous methodology Chapter, three key themes emerged during the thematic analysis of data collected during both phases of fieldwork (i.e. three creative workshops and 12 peer group interviews). This Chapter is structured as follows, first, each of the three themes is briefly introduced with an explanation as to how the overall nature of the theme relates to the specific research questions addressed in this thesis. Second, each theme is presented in detail in its own section with explanations as to how it has been constructed in terms of its underlying sub-themes, supported with relevant insights from the data. Third, this Chapter concludes with a summary of the most significant findings from the research project overall, which are then discussed and explicated in the following discussion Chapter.

4.1.1 Key Themes

All three of the overarching themes reported in this Chapter relate to the nature of children's advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment, the exploration of which was one of the primary objectives of this PhD thesis. Each theme provides rich insights into separate but interrelated aspects of children's advertising literacy, which ultimately align to provide answers to the original research questions and a unique perspective on this important topic.

4.1.1.1 Theme One - The Omnipresence of Omnichannel Advertising

The first theme presented in this Chapter; *The omnipresence of omnichannel advertising*, reflects children's increased media consumption habits and the subsequent increase in their exposure to commercialised information, which appears to have become somewhat inescapable and entrenched in their everyday lives.

4.1.1.2 Theme Two - Marketing's Role in Children's Lifestyle and Identity Formation

The second theme; *Marketing's role in children's lifestyle and identity formation* relates to one of the central arguments of this thesis - that consumption is inherently social. As such, this theme attempts to highlight some of the ways in which contemporary advertising (in all its forms) plays a role in the overall matrix of children's consumer socialisation.

4.1.1.3 Theme Three - Children's Evaluation of Advertising

The third theme; *Children's evaluation of advertising* relates to the specific questions surrounding children's understanding and interpretation of contemporary advertising in other words, their advertising literacy. This theme builds on Themes One and Two and brings together unique insights into how children interpret the commercialised information that they encounter on a daily basis and some of the ways that their advertising literacy is enacted in practice.

For ease of reference for the reader, the research objectives and links to the research questions addressed in this thesis are reproduced below:

4.1.2 Research objectives:

- To explore children's awareness and perceptions of contemporary advertising formats (RQ1)
- To explore the nature of children's advertising literacy from a sociological perspective as a guide for future decisions on advertising policy, ethically-grounded regulations and responsible advertising practice (RQ2 and RQ3)
- To develop a nuanced framework for children's advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment (RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3)

4.1.3 Research Questions

- RQ1: *What are children's perceptions of contemporary advertising formats?*
- RQ2: *What can a sociological perspective on consumption reveal about the nature of children's advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment?*
- RQ3: *How is children's advertising literacy enacted in practice?*

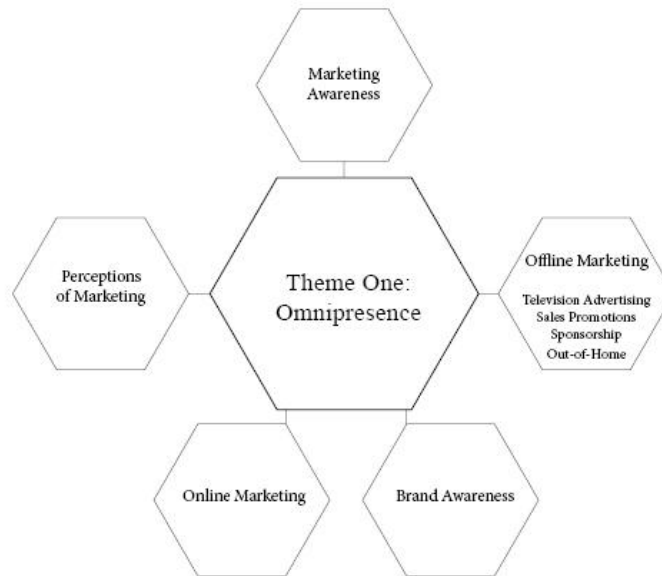
4.1.4 Use of Quotations

Where appropriate, participants' own words are used verbatim throughout this Chapter in the form of direct quotations from fieldwork transcriptions to provide additional context and to emphasise key points for the reader. These are anonymously attributed using the following code; W = Workshop, P = Participant. IT = Interview.

(For example, W3P3 = Workshop number 3, Participant 3. IT12P2 = Interview number 12, Participant 2.)

4.2 Theme One: The Omnipresence of Omnichannel Advertising

Figure 4.1 Key Findings from Theme One



(Source: Author's own work).

4.2.1 Introduction to Theme One

The first theme presented in this Chapter; *The omnipresence of omnichannel advertising* (as illustrated in Figure 4.1 above), began to take shape relatively early on in the research process, following an analysis of child-targeted commercialised content as detailed earlier in this thesis. The most significant components of this theme are shown in Figure 4.1 and explained in this section.

The term 'omnipresence' - taken literally to mean 'present everywhere at the same time', is considered to be highly appropriate when applied to the nature of the contemporary media environment, not least because marketing communications have quite simply become enmeshed into every part of today's society. As one participant articulated;

W2P4: "So like if something repeatedly, so like, if it's like going on again and again and again and again like 'buy this' (.) a few minutes later (.) 'buy this', you go outside (.) on the side of a bus (.) 'buy this' (.) you turn left, on a poster, 'buy this!'"

Overall, this first theme reflects the increasing convergence between traditional and digital formats within the marketing industry as a whole in the UK. It also reflects children's increased media consumption habits and the subsequent increased exposure to commercialised information that has become somewhat inescapable and entrenched in their everyday lives. Hence, the use of the term 'omnichannel' from the Latin 'omnis' meaning 'every/all' is considered to be an accurate way of describing the seamless, unified consumer experience increasingly sought by many manufacturers, brands and retailers in the 21st century (Chen, Cheung and Tan, 2018).

Indeed, during the analysis of industry reports into children's media consumption habits in the early phases of this research, it became apparent that some of the biggest increases in media exposure pertain to the increasingly widespread use of social media platforms amongst children (Ofcom, 2021). One outcome of this increased media consumption is an increase in the amount of commercialised material and content that children are exposed to on a daily basis. To reiterate the point made in Section 2.3, the term 'exposure' is defined in this research as 'opportunities to see any material (offline) and/or content (online) that has an underlying commercial agenda'.

Whilst the notion of children's increased exposure to all forms of marketing communications (e.g. online and offline) is by no means a new issue, the findings presented in this Chapter provide a new perspective compared to the majority of previous research on children's advertising literacy, which has predominantly focused less on qualitative explorations of children's perceptions and attitudes and more on quantitative investigations of recall and recognition. Thus, by adopting a creative and participatory approach to data collection and analysis, this PhD research presents novel insights into children's awareness and perceptions of contemporary advertising formats, which are presented in detail in the following Subsections 4.2.2 - 4.2.6.3.

4.2.2 Children's Awareness of Marketing - "*Do you mean advertising*"?

As discussed in the literature review Chapter of this thesis (Chapter 2), the practice of marketing can be defined in many ways, for example as an exchange of value (Alderson, 1957) a strategic business function (Anderson, 1982) or as an umbrella term to describe the various different elements of the marketing mix such as the strategies and tactics relating to product, place, price and promotion (McCarthy, 1960). However, during the pre-fieldwork

testing and the first phase of data collection in this research, it became apparent that children aged 9-11 years old do not fully understand the term “marketing” in the same sense that academics or practitioners who work in the marketing industry do. Arguably, this is probably true for most adults in the UK too.

It is also true that the myriad elements of contemporary commercial material and content that are explored throughout this thesis do, theoretically, fall under the overarching umbrella term of “marketing”. However, as noted in the literature review Chapter, there is a strong case for broadening the definition of advertising to include a wider range of marketing communications tactics that have previously been considered separate elements of the promotional mix. Indeed, this was reinforced by the children who participated in this research who appeared to be much more familiar with the term “advertising” instead, which aligns with the view that consumers tend to regard virtually all commercial messages as “advertising” (Malmelin, 2010, p132).

To put this into context, during both phases of the fieldwork, all 41 participants were able to describe at least one different element of the marketing mix, from pricing strategies (e.g. sales promotions) and product features (e.g. functional and symbolic features) to promotional and sales-oriented communications (e.g. ‘buy it now’). Yet there was a clear tendency amongst participants to group all of these elements under the generic term of “advertising”. Therefore, the decision was taken by the researcher to continue to use the term “advertising” when referring to all of the different types of marketing techniques throughout both phases of the fieldwork because this made the most sense to the participants and is aligned to the working conceptualisation of advertising introduced in this thesis.

Participants were asked to sit in a circle on chairs in the classroom, and the researcher deliberately sat on the floor to communicate the informal, relaxed nature of the session in a nonverbal way and to make the participants feel more comfortable during the discussions. The first question that participants were asked at the beginning of each creative workshop was; “*When you think about advertising, what pops into your head?*”. This question was deliberately open-ended to ease the participants into discussions. Reassured by the researcher that there were “no right and wrong answers” to this question, participants' across the three workshops were able to describe, explain and provide at least one relevant example of an advertisement, as well as talk about a wide range of offline and online marketing

communications formats (albeit based on the perception that these were all forms of advertising).

The children responded enthusiastically towards the initial question, which was evidenced by lots of participants talking at once. Furthermore, even though each of the workshops involved a different group of children, when the separate transcripts from each workshop were compared during data analysis, there were clear similarities in participants' discussion of certain topics across all the three groups. There was a clear consistency across all three workshops regarding discussions were led by the participants and were relatively consistent in the presentation of television advertising as the most 'obvious' answer to this question. Participants supported their ideas about advertising with real world examples of different types of advertisement, which were enhanced with accurate descriptions of typical features of advertising. advertisements on television were regarded as a form of advertising that anybody and everybody would recognise. The idea that there might be a child living in the UK aged 9, 10 or 11 years who had never seen a television advertisement or would not know what television advertising is was unfathomable. One source of this understanding/persuasion knowledge appeared to come from exposure to advertising and was a topic that they felt comfortable and confident talking about. However, the enthusiasm shown by the participants combined with a lack of clarification questions should not necessarily be taken as an indication of blanket understanding. It is possible that some participants may not have understood the question but may have felt less confident in contributing to the discussion for several reasons, for instance, personality, or with an unfamiliar individual; i.e. the researcher.

One of the most common responses to this initial question across all three workshops was to refer to "adverts" or "ads". During analysis, it became apparent that participants readily associated advertising with its underlying persuasive intent. For instance, multiple references were made that related to persuading consumers/the audience to "want things", as well as creating desires and needs and a feeling that "you can't live without it" (W1P3).

W2P2: "If you see it, or your parents, ask you like for example, if you see it on a billboard and it's something you like, you're obviously gonna be like oh I really want that, or if you see something on the shop but you like it and your parents don't like it, and you say, there still going to get it"

There were also multiple references to the calls to action within advertising, such as the encouragement of exchange, usually relating to financial transactions i.e. “make you pay money”, but also in terms of desired behaviour, where advertisers “want you to go on the app”. Participants’ answers to this question indicated an understanding of advertising format (i.e. persuasive tactics) and advertising function (i.e. its commercial agenda).

It was noted that when asked this initial question, none of the participants in any of the workshops asked for clarification of the meaning of the term ‘advertising’. On reflection, this could indicate that the term advertising was so familiar to the participants they felt confident that they could explain their understanding, indicating that they did not require any further explanation to understand the question. There was some evidence to support this assumption. For example, television advertising was consistently top of mind for participants and the first answer given.

4.2.2.1 Television Advertising

Within this context, participants were able to describe many television advertisements for a multitude of products and services. Somewhat unsurprisingly, many of these descriptions of television advertisements related to typical child-targeted products such as toys, games, HFSS foods and confectionary. In addition, other participants described television advertisements that could be considered to be primarily aimed at an adult audience, such as those for financial services, household appliances and cars.

Indeed, findings indicate that television advertisements seem to be quite memorable for children, even if they are not necessarily targeted at them specifically. For example, the automotive financing company; *Cinch* was mentioned repeatedly throughout the creative workshops.

WIP3: “when I’m watching TV and the adverts come up I always hear ‘Cinch’ and at the end of it like the noise gets into your head and it’s (.) it sounds quite nice after a long time”

The use of the phrase “*the adverts come up*” by this participant here seemingly indicates his recognition of the separation in content between the television programme he was watching and the commercial that interrupted it. Interestingly, this participant describes what he can hear during the *Cinch* advertisement, rather than what he can see or what he can remember seeing, which might suggest that even though he did not give the advertisement his full

attention at the time, the use of auditory cues and music (i.e. “*the noise*”) has helped him to remember the advertisement and actually feel quite positive towards it after repeated exposure (“*it sounds quite nice after a long time*”).

In terms of television-related advertising literacy, analysis indicated that overall, children’s awareness and understanding of television advertising is good and they can easily recognise commercials from other television programmes. This insight emerged from analysis of general discussions as well as participants’ explanations of typical television advertising characteristics, which were evidenced with relevant examples.

A high level of awareness and understanding of television advertising was not unexpected for these participants, based on the extensive literature relating to the topic of children’s understanding of television advertisements from the last fifty years (as discussed in Section 2.3.2.1. One reason for this could be due to the fact that television is a well-established medium for communication. Furthermore, the basic *format* of child-targeted television advertisements has actually changed very little over the last forty years. For example, whilst it is true that the production values of television advertisements have become more sophisticated over time as have the types of products that are targeted at young audiences, child-targeted television advertisements remain typically ‘product heavy’, meaning that the main focus is almost always on the practical or symbolic characteristics of the advertised product itself, whether it is a game, a toy or a specific food item. This approach has endured over the last twenty years and is essentially the same approach as that used by television advertisers throughout the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. Additionally, since the ban on host-selling on children’s television and the restriction on programme-length commercials introduced in the 1980s (Kunkel, 1987), the majority of television advertisements typically last for a much shorter duration than the programmes that they appear alongside, averaging 30 seconds in length. Thus, today’s television advertisements are still clearly demarcated from the entertainment programmes that they appear alongside. Television advertisements still literally interrupt and break-up the programme that is being shown on the channel at the time.

As one participant described:

IT12P1: “Yeah like if you’re on tv channel, then it will probably take you off the tv channel [programme] and show you like a Dominoes [pizza] advert or something”

This interruption causes a break in the audience's attention, which may be diverted onto the advertisement depending on several factors including how appealing that advertisement is perceived to be by the child. This point is returned to in the following discussion Chapter.

Therefore, it is unsurprising that television advertising was one of the most frequently mentioned marketing formats in response to this initial question, given the wealth of evidence from academic and grey literature, which maintains that watching television is still a popular leisure activity for children of all ages in the UK (Newman and Oates, 2012; Ofcom, 2021). Television advertising is perhaps one of the most recognisable forms of advertising for children, given the fact that almost every household in the UK now owns at least one television set (ONS, 2020) and British children are typically introduced to television viewing at a very young age (Ofcom, 2021). It is probably likely that children encounter advertisements on television at an earlier age than advertisements on other formats such as out-of-home or on social media platforms, which require a certain level of physical dexterity and literacy in the traditional sense (i.e. the ability to read and write) to navigate effectively. Children's access to television also appears to be less restricted by parents and caregivers than their access to social media platforms (Ofcom, 2021). That is not to say that very young children do not have access to these platforms either, just that television is likely to be the medium that they have the earliest contact with and may actually be encouraged by parents (Ofcom, 2021).

In addition to television advertising, participants were also able to describe several other traditional 'offline' marketing communications, including sales promotions, sponsorship and out-of-home advertising.

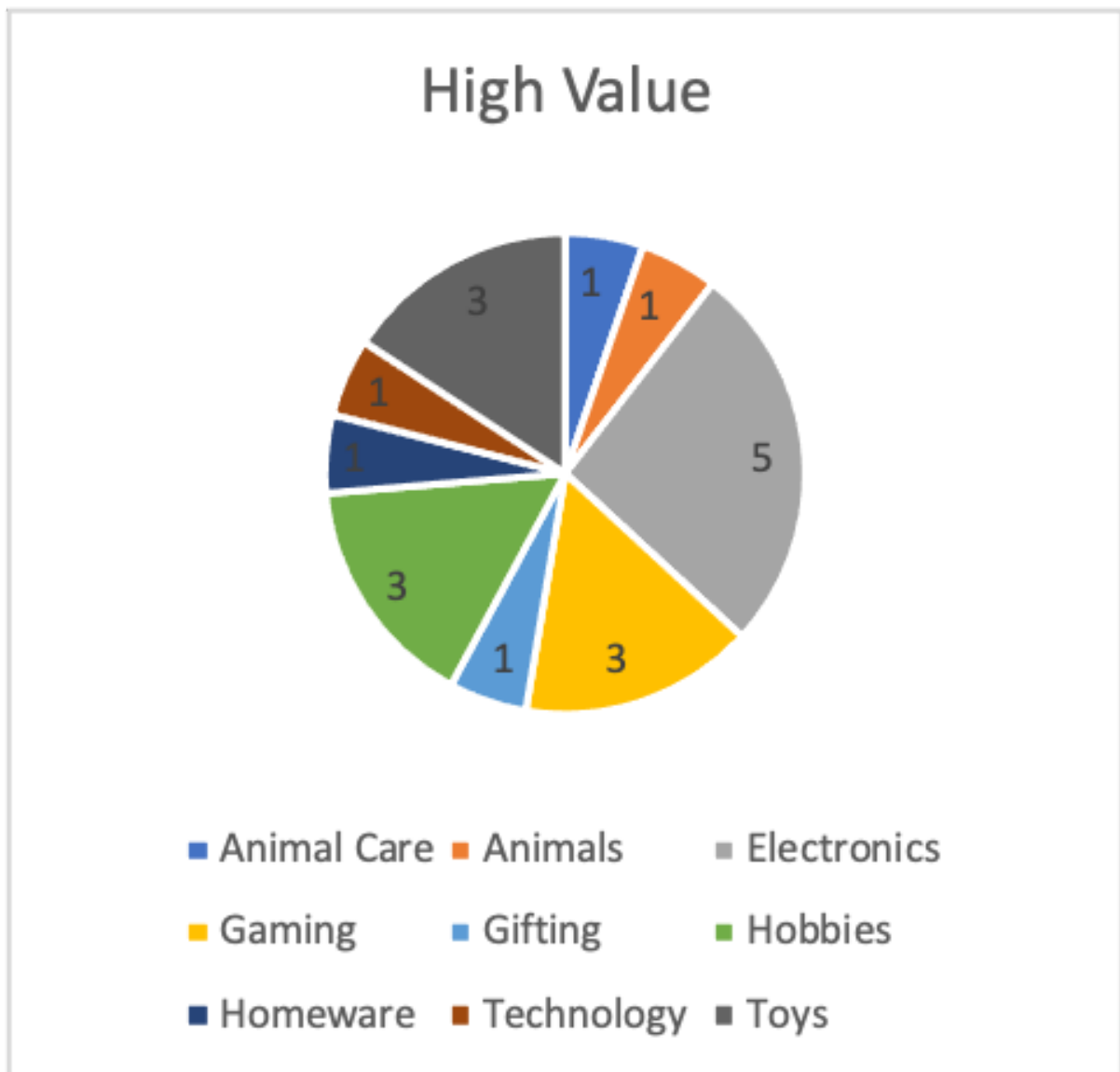
4.2.2.2 Children's Awareness of Sales Promotions

As indicated in the literature review in Section 2.2.2.5, children's understanding of sales promotions such as price discounts and special offers has typically received less attention in academic advertising literacy research (Williams, Ashill and Thirkill, 2016). This is potentially because these are technically forms of marketing as opposed to advertising or it could also be a reflection of the approaches taken by researchers, which rarely explore children's consumption behaviour and purchase decisions from their perspectives.

In order to address this gap, two of the creative workshop tasks were deliberately designed to facilitate discussions on these topics; the Value Trolley exercise and the optional Packaging

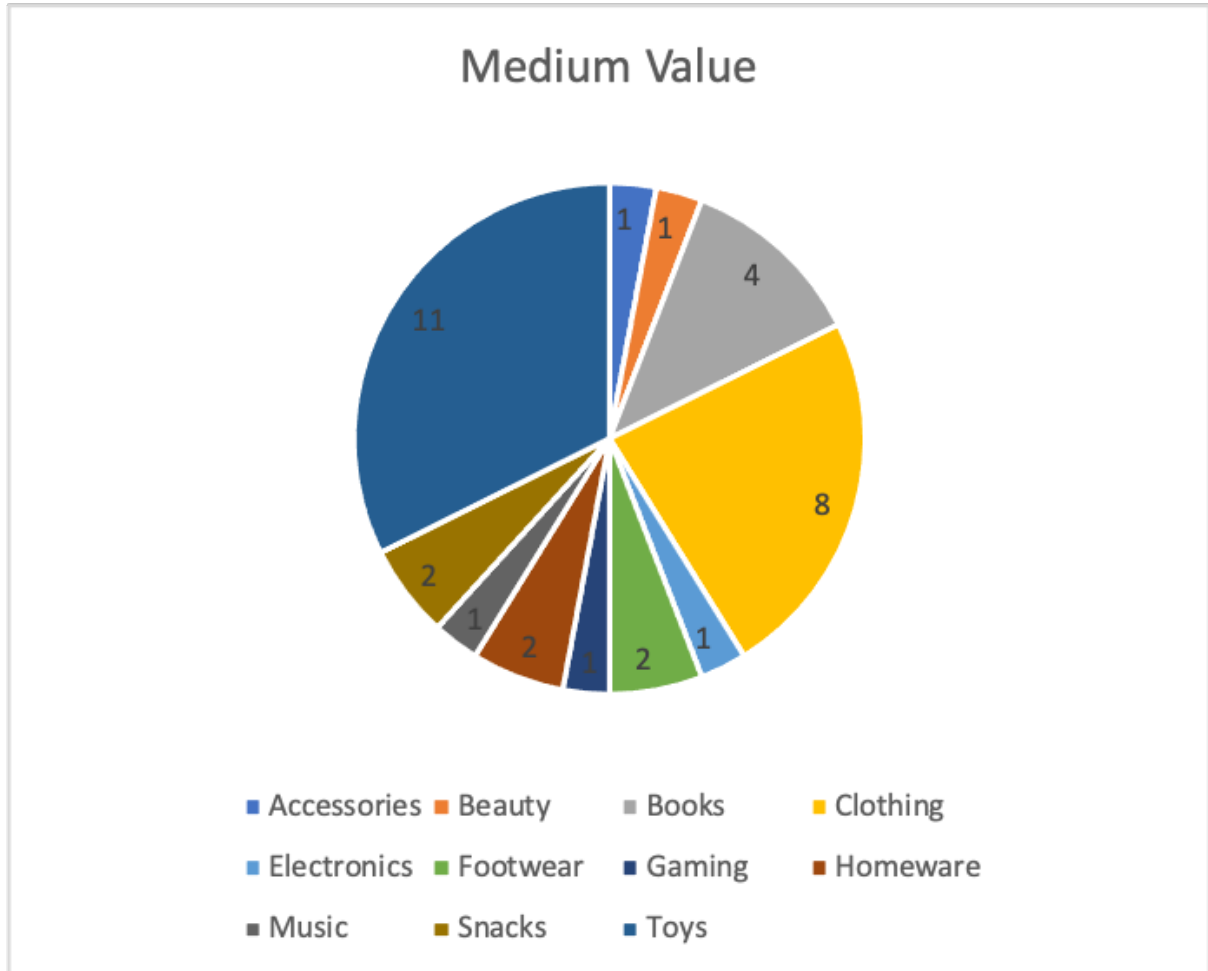
Design task. Children were asked to complete a ‘Value Trolley’ activity by adding ‘post-it’ notes to a large cardboard illustration of a shopping trolley, which was split into three sections. As part of this exercise, the participants were given colour-coded post-it notes and asked to “write or draw any items that they had chosen or would choose to spend their own money on”. The participants were also asked to categorise items according to its perceived value (i.e. green notes for low value everyday items, yellow notes for mid value items and red notes for high value, less frequently made purchases). The following three charts (4.2, 4.3 & 4.4) illustrate the types of products suggested by participants and how they chose to categorise them during this exercise.

Figure 4.2 High Value Items



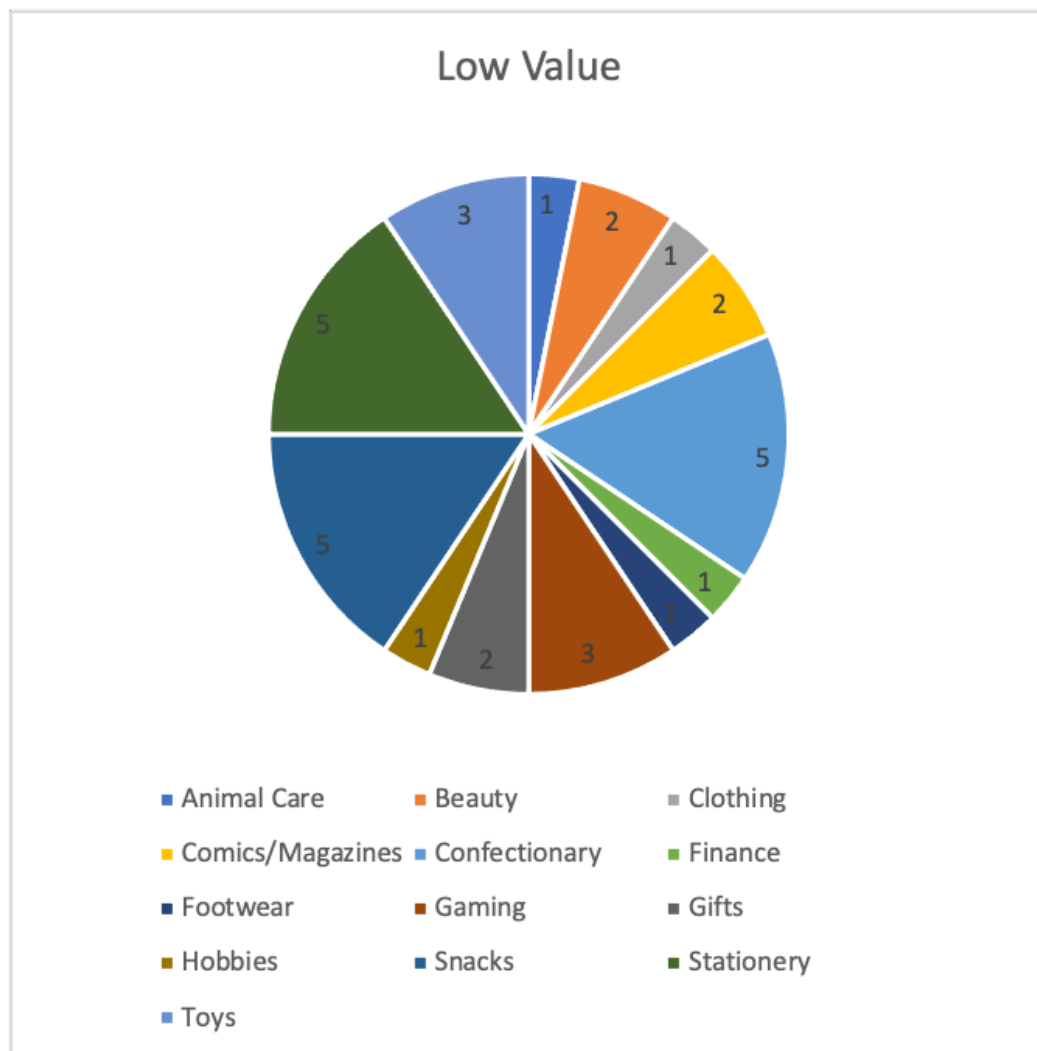
(Source: Author's own work).

Figure 4.3 Medium Value Items



(Source: Author's own work).

Figure 4.4 Low Value Items



(Source: Author’s own work).

During the discussions, participants demonstrated awareness of psychological pricing techniques for example:

W1P7: “the number 99, because people usually say you can buy this for £1.99 instead of £2 and the person will think oh it’s not £2 it’s £1.99”

W1P6: “yeah in a shop, anything, it’s normally like if it’s, if it’s like Christmas or something, they like, put the, lower the prices to make you get it”

Other participants also made references to direct marketing techniques such as email promotions, for example:

W3P2: “Happy Birthday email from Aldi, Merry Christmas from Ryanair”

For those participants who opted to complete the Packaging Design task, they were asked to design some packaging for a product or brand of their choice based on the whole group's contributions to the Graffiti Wall. What was interesting here is that a number of participants chose to include sales promotions or discounts as part of their packaging designs.

When asked for their reasons for including these, participants explained how they felt that price discounts and special offers were effective ways of encouraging people to purchase products. This provided an early indication that children consider the price of an item to be important, an insight which is explored in more depth in Theme Three (see Section 4.4).

4.2.2.3 Sponsorship

The concept of sponsorship was not discussed as frequently by participants as the other marketing communications formats presented thus far. Although, when sponsorship was mentioned, participants were able to describe it accurately and provide basic explanations of how it works in different contexts. For example, in an offline context, participants' references to sponsorship were almost always related to sport in some way. For example, several participants described their awareness of the presence of brand names and logos on football kits, although few actually referred to this as sponsorship, instead providing it as another example of advertising. In contrast, participants were much more familiar with the concept of sponsorship as it exists in an online context, particularly in the case of "sponsored" online content. Evidently, this was most notable in the case of sponsored videos on YouTube. The specific findings related to children's awareness of online marketing content are presented in more detail in Section 4.2.4.

4.2.2.4 Out-of-home Advertising

In addition, participants were able to describe and explain lots of different examples of out-of-home or outdoor advertisements that they had seen displayed in prominent, public areas. These included advertisements on billboards as well as on static and digital 'six-sheets' (i.e. advertising/media display stands) such as those placed on the sides of shelters at bus stops and in shopping centres and high footfall areas of their local towns and cities. For example;

W3P4: "There's like billboards in town and like there's just (.) there's (.) there's billboards and also like the little things that are like swipe up in town (.) like in town there's these little big blocks and it's just loads of adverts on there (.) but they're digital... they're full of adverts"

On reflection, it appears that out-of-home marketing formats have not been scrutinised to the same extent as television advertising or online advertising by advertising literacy researchers. From a policy perspective, the ASA has rules in place regarding the geographical restrictions on these formats in the UK, yet in practice, there is very little that can be done to prevent children from seeing out-of-home advertisements in public spaces or in retail environments. In terms of “opportunities to see”, these formats are everywhere. Perhaps exposure to out-of-home advertisements is considered to be less harmful to children than other types of advertising that are more strictly regulated? Arguably, there is a limited amount of interaction involved and exposure is typically brief. These formats also contain less information and fewer direct calls to action than other advertising formats. Furthermore, there may also be an element of normalisation in terms of the general acceptance of these formats. Is it the case that the public are so used to seeing such advertisements during their daily lives that they are not as effective? These questions suggest there could be a need to explore children’s exposure to these formats further.

Several participants suggested that the brands (brand names and logos) displayed on the bodywork of commercial vehicles could be a form of advertising too. For example, the technology brand ‘Vodafone’, which one participant described seeing displayed on the side of Heavy Good Vehicles (HGVs).

WIP5: “Vodafone (.) like you see it on trucks and lorries, like on that big plastic cover”

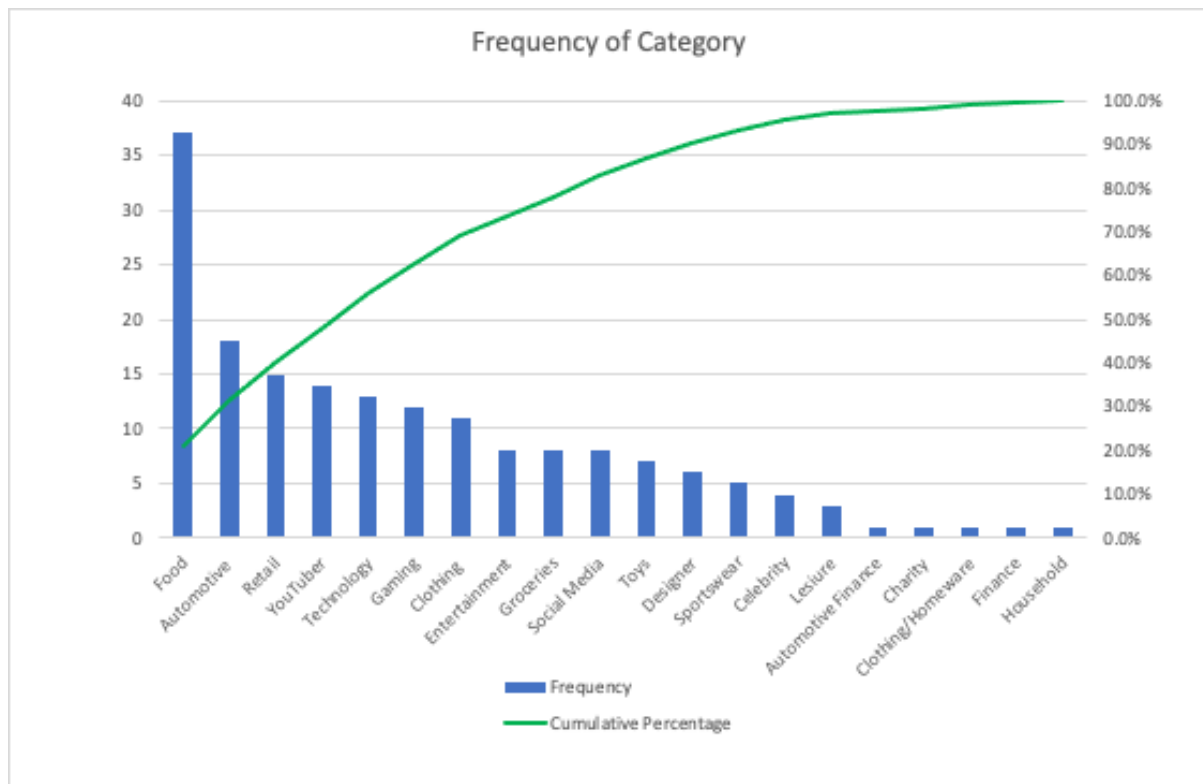
This participant did not refer to an advertisement specifically here, but was aware of Vodafone simply from seeing the brand name. The concept of branding is inextricably linked to the practice of marketing; hence children’s understanding of brands was considered to be another meaningful topic of exploration during the fieldwork. Therefore, in order to facilitate an insightful discussion about brands, children were encouraged to write or draw anything that they thought of or associated or with the word “brand” during the Graffiti Wall group activity (as outlined in the previous methodology Chapter). This activity was undertaken by every participant in each of the three workshops and took place following the initial group discussions about advertising and the key findings from this exercise are presented in the following Section 4.2.3.

4.2.3 Children’s Awareness of Brands

In addition, all 41 participants were able to correctly name a wide range of brands that they were already aware of, as well as provide multiple examples of branded products that they had requested or purchased for themselves previously. The participants were encouraged to respond to the question “what does the word brand mean to you?” through participation in the Graffiti Wall task. Participants were informed that they could draw or write anything that they associated with the word ‘brand’ on the ‘wall’ in a form of free association. The researcher did not play an active role in this exercise and only offered clarification around spellings of brand names when asked directly. Participants were encouraged to talk to each other and work together.

Collectively, the 41 children who participated in the first phase of this research were able to name 174 different brands during this activity, which lasted approximately 15 minutes in each workshop. The full list of brands mentioned in all three workshops can be found in Appendix F.

Figure 4.5 presents a categorisation of all 174 brands to illustrate the wide range of brands discussed during this activity.



(Source: Author's own work).

To summarise the most significant findings here, the most popular brands suggested by the participants and discussed during the workshops were brands that have been categorised as 'Food', 'Automotive', 'Retail', 'YouTuber', 'Technology', 'Gaming' and 'Clothing' as shown in Table 4.1. Overall, these findings are consistent with data published by industry sources such as Kids Insights (2021) and Ofcom (2021) which report the most popular brands with children in the UK during the timeframe of this research (2019 - 2022).

This was reflected in the children's discussion around brands, with many brands emerging based on products, services and experiences that participants expressed personal preferences for, based on their own lifestyles, hobbies and interests. The participants demonstrated strong awareness of brand identity as a concept encompassing distinctive logos, symbols and slogans. There were also references to various aspects of 'brand personality' (Aaker, 1997) with certain brands generally considered to be unequivocally 'cool' by the participants, their friends and other children of a similar age group. In addition to demonstrating their awareness of different brands, participants also appeared to draw on their personal experiences of brands in other contexts. For example, brands that they associated with shopping for themselves and with their friends in retail environments (e.g. *H&M*, *Adidas* and *Smiggle*), brands of clothing that their older siblings liked to wear (e.g. *Next*, *River Island* and *Off White*) and brands that they associated with the experience of eating out at restaurants and with ordering takeaways with their families and friends (e.g. *Pizza Express*, *Nandos* and *Dominos*). On further analysis, it appeared to be the case that participants' descriptions of brands almost always contained some sort of social element.

This insight also features in Section 4.3 (Theme Two) and is considered to be a significant finding of this research. As such, it is returned to from a theoretical perspective in the discussion Chapter in Section 5.2.

4.2.3.1. Food brands (37 different brands mentioned)

Food brands accounted for 21% of all of the brands mentioned during this exercise. Furthermore, the majority (over 90%) of all of the food brands mentioned could be further categorised as brands associated with HFSS food products and snacks. For example, *McDonalds*, *KFC* and *Doritos* (Walkers).

This excerpt from the first workshop illustrates this:

WIP4: "Wait, McDonalds"

WIP1: "I love McDonalds!"

[Multiple participants shouting at once]

SS: Why do you love McDonalds?

WIP1: "Chicken nuggets and chips!"

WIP11: "Awww yeah, McDonalds!"

WIP7: "I like the McFlurry because I like to wait for the ice cream to melt and then eat it"

WIP8: "They have Space Jam toys at the moment"

WIP9: "Space Jam"

Elsewhere, in the storyboarding exercise, several participants opted to use McDonalds as the brand for their YouTube video. For example,

WIP3: "It starts off, so basically, so [WIP1] says "we're going to McDonalds" and then me and [WIP6] run off and she comes in a YouTube top and I come in a box and then we drive to McDonalds and we get there and we order everything. And then it arrives, we eat it and then when we're nearly finished, we're all like 'mmmmmm McDonalds' [rubs his tummy] and then the bill, we go 'Woah this is way too expensive' and then we just run away"

[group laughs]

WIP1: "When we get to McDonalds, it [the restaurant] is really full so we're showing that it is really popular, and people want to go there and we're saying it looks so good"

SS: It's interesting that you chose to put yourselves in the video, why was that?

WIP1: "Yeah, maybe because if it was adults they might think 'maybe we can't do this because it's adults', but if it's kids then maybe they'll think like 'yeah, that's like a kids place it's like er how they get those Happy Meals', it's like kids only eat Happy Meals there so that's it's child-friendly."

SS: Do you think, erm, kids your age like videos that are made by other kids?

WIP3: "Yeah"

The enduring popularity of McDonalds amongst children of all ages is well documented (Rivera, 2016; Dalton et al., 2017; Emond, 2019). Therefore, it was unsurprising the brand was mentioned frequently by participants in other workshop discussions and activities, both as something that children would choose to spend their own money on (as revealed by the findings from Value Trolley exercise in Section 4.2.3.5) and featuring as the brand of choice in some of the participants' YouTube video storyboards.

4.2.3.2 Automotive Brands (18 different brands)

The second most mentioned brand category was automotive. Participants described brands of vehicles that their parents owned, for example *Mercedes*, *BMW*, and *Peugeot* as well as brands of cars that they thought were “*really cool*” or that they aspired to drive or own one day such as *Bugatti* and *Lamborghini* supercars. Indeed, not all of the brands discussed during this exercise related to child-targeted products and services. As was evidenced in the general group discussions about advertising at the beginning of each workshop, participants felt that they frequently saw advertisements for a wide range of branded products across different communications channels, which might explain the popularity of automotive brands in this exercise, as well as participants’ awareness of non-child-targeted brands such as *Cinch*.

4.2.3.3 Retail Brands (15 different brands)

The next most mentioned brand category in this exercise was retail, with clothing stores such as *River Island* and *H&M* mentioned in all three workshops. The retail brands mentioned in this exercise varied widely both in terms of the type and the general price range of products stocked, from lower budget retailers such as *Home Bargains* and *B&M Bargains* through to luxury designer retailers such as *Chanel*, *Louis Vuitton* and *Gucci*. Additionally, brands in this category included the ‘big four’ UK supermarkets; *Tesco*, *Asda*, *Sainsburys* and *Morrisons* as well as the discounter *Aldi* and several more expensive grocery retailers such as *Marks and Spencer* and *Waitrose*.

4.2.3.4 People as Brands - YouTubers (14 different YouTube influencers)

Some participants also mentioned the names of certain individuals during the Graffiti Wall exercise, for example, the UK Prime Minister; Boris Johnson (at the time of writing), Amazon CEO; Jeff Bezos and fictional Hollywood hero; James Bond as brands. These suggestions of public figures as brands could potentially reflect an awareness amongst these participants that a brand can be associated with a person, rather than just with a company, a manufacturer of a product or a service provider. Additionally, participants also included 14 high-profile ‘YouTubers’ (e.g. *FreshyBoi*, *Lazer Lazer* and *Mr Beast*) as brands as well. When participants were asked why they had chosen to include a particular YouTuber on the Graffiti Wall, they provided several reasons as to why they considered them to be brands. One explanation related to the blatant promotion of a YouTuber’s own merchandise, for example,

WP2P: “They do sponsor and sell merchandise, because every time I watch, erm, one of the YouTubers called Infinite... Preston, FreshyBoi, Lazer Lazer, all of them, they always at the end of the stuff, they show his merchandise”

Another reason related to the presence of obvious commercially motivated collaborations and personalised discount codes for subscribers and other discussions related to more subtle branding elements such as a YouTuber’s reputation or reach (evidenced by a large number of followers and views). Overall, the shared perception of YouTubers as brands appeared to be the result of participants’ personal and social interactions with the influencer’s own content, or rather the more obvious commercial aspects of that content. To make sense of this, self-branding and self-presentation on social media are discussed in more detail in the following Chapter.

4.2.3.5 Technology Brands (13 different brands)

Unsurprisingly, given the prevalence of electronic device ownership and usage amongst the participants, technology brands such as *Apple*, *Samsung* and *Amazon* were mentioned frequently during the workshops. Aside from discussing the brands of technology that they owned or used in the home, such as video-on-demand services such as *Netflix* and *Prime (Amazon)*, participants also described how they would pay more attention to advertisements for these brands because they were interested in the latest gadgets.

4.2.3.6 Gaming Brands (12 different brands)

The popularity of gaming as a leisure activity amongst participants was evident in both phases of the research, with online games such as *Roblox*, *Fortnite* and *Minecraft* widely agreed to be the most well-known and frequently played. In addition, the manufacturers of the technology used to play these games, such as *Nintendo* and *Xbox* (Microsoft) were also mentioned by participants.

4.2.3.7 Clothing Brands (11 different brands)

Like with retail brands, participants' suggestions of clothing brands ranged from low budget manufacturers such as *Primark* and *Sports Direct* through to designer clothing labels such as *Off White* and *Gucci*. Discussions revealed that going clothes shopping was generally an enjoyable experience and participants explained how they felt that they had more say and choice over where they shopped for clothes compared to when they were younger.

Awareness of high-end luxury brands appeared to be linked to online influencers and celebrities as opposed to being brands of clothing that the children wore themselves.

4.2.3.8 Social Media Platforms

In addition to the brands presented so far, all of the major social media platforms; *YouTube*, *TikTok*, *Instagram*, *Snapchat*, *Facebook* and *WhatsApp* were mentioned as brands in every workshop. Although, only a few participants reported that they actually had their own profiles on these platforms. This is perhaps indicative of the age of participants at the time of the research, who at 9, 10 and 11 years old are technically too young to have a profile on these applications, which have a recommended usage age of 13 years +.

A brand was considered to be well known amongst the children if it was mentioned multiple times by multiple different participants in each workshop and also if it was mentioned by participants from more than one workshop. However, in order to determine a brand's perceived popularity with the children themselves, it was not sufficient to simply count the number of times a brand was mentioned. This is because it became apparent that some of the most well-known brands were also the ones that the participants disliked the most. Therefore, it was important to consider children's preferences for different brands and the positive and negative associations with them too during data analysis.

4.2.4 Children's Awareness of Online Advertising

This section presents the findings specifically relating to children's awareness and perceptions of online marketing formats from both the workshops and the interviews. As indicated earlier, all of the participants were able to describe multiple digital marketing formats that they were aware of and that they had experienced personally, such as pop-up advertisements on websites, pre-roll video advertisements on YouTube as well as various types of influencer marketing on social media platforms to some extent. This was not unexpected, given the evidence that children of all ages are spending increased amounts of time on their electronic devices (Ofcom, 2021). Hence, these findings support the suggestion that the way children choose to view entertainment programmes continues to change over time as more children switch to watching YouTube for entertainment over traditional television (Ofcom, 2021). All but one participant across the three workshops (N=40) accessed the video sharing platform YouTube on a regular basis (verbally clarified as 'at least

a couple of times per week if not daily’) a finding which also reinforces recent industry evidence of the platform’s popularity with this age group (Ofcom, 2022).

Advertising on YouTube was mentioned as frequently as television advertising throughout both phases of the fieldwork. For example,

W3P4: “Like sometimes on YouTube videos they have like ‘paid promotion’ and they just say or sponsored like this and ‘you could do this’ in it”

IT4P3: “So when you’re watching YouTube you would know it was advertising because instead of a red line, it would be a yellow line [time indicator] and you can’t look down for the rest of the video”

The similarities between watching television and watching YouTube have already been discussed in Section 2.3.2.1, yet analysis suggests that there are also some subtle differences between the two mediums in terms of the type of advertising content that children are likely to see. To elaborate, in terms of content, the subjects of advertisements on YouTube appear to be much more wide-ranging and unpredictable compared to the subjects of television advertisements that are shown during children’s television programmes. For example, when watching programmes on television channels that are aimed specifically at children (e.g. CITV or Cartoon Network) during peak viewing times (such as after school and at the weekends) participants explained how these advertisements are predominantly aimed at the young target audience and usually feature child-targeted products such as toys and games.

IT10P2: “Yeah, some adverts have stuff for kids so to get kids to buy whatever is being advertised (.) they show kids playing and having fun to convince the viewers”

These advertisements may also feature products, services and experiences that are aimed at families, such as those created by package holiday providers and supermarkets, in order to appeal to parents who may be watching television with their children or present in the same room as the television during these times.

In contrast, participants discussed how the subjects of advertisements shown on YouTube are actually extremely wide ranging, even where the content of the selected video is aimed at a young audience. This was the case for advertisements that are shown before the selected video is shown (i.e. pre-roll) and for the advertisements that typically appear at regular intervals (i.e. mid-roll) during a longer video (those longer than 15 minutes in duration). As indicated by the content analysis, many of the videos created by popular children’s

influencers or “YouTubers” are often longer than 15 minutes, with some of the most watched videos (evidenced by millions of views) such as those related to the topic of gaming lasting up to 90 minutes, which is the same length as the average film. In one feature-length YouTube video about the game *Minecraft* there may be up to 20 commercials, including advertisements for alcohol products and life insurance.

It was evident that because of their familiarity with using YouTube, participants were quick to describe the more obvious forms of advertising on this platform. However, as is argued in later sections of this Chapter, there was a distinct lack of understanding amongst participants that online marketing can include more subtle persuasive tactics and does not just take the form of pre-roll or mid roll advertisements on YouTube. In contrast, on newer video service platforms, such as TikTok, there appeared to be fewer obvious signs to indicate advertising content from other content. As one participant explained, the only way to identify advertising on TikTok was by being unable to comment on a video:

IT12P1: “There’s been quite a lot of Subway adverts on TikTok (.) like now that I think of it (.) like whenever I go on it [TikTok], I’ll probably see a Subway advert, and it makes me want a Subway” [laughs]

SS: Are they by Subway or is it other people showing Subway in the videos?

IT12P1: “They’re from Subway, as in you get it up and you can’t go onto their, like you can’t comment on them, that’s how you know it’s an advertisement, because if TikTok is putting it on there, you can’t like it [the video] you can’t comment and you can’t follow them, like that’s an “advertisement” advertisement”

As explained at the beginning of this Chapter, the overall aim of this research was to explore children’s understanding of advertising in the contemporary media environment, in part to address the imbalance in previous advertising literacy research, which has largely focused on more traditional methods (Buijzen et al., 2010). During the fieldwork, it started to become more obvious that participants tended to associate advertising with recognisable features or disclosure cues. During further discussions in interview 12, the participant explained how that could potentially influence the way that content is interpreted. For example,

IT12P1: “Yeah, I mean on like other platforms apart from TikTok, like YouTube and on apps, it’s [advertising is] quite obvious because it takes you off of your game, and shows you like an ad [advertisement] for a different game, or on YouTube it shows you an ad for a computer or something - that’s just the first thing that popped into my head (.) but on TikTok most of the time they’re giving you an ad, well they might not be giving you an ad, it’s quite hard to tell because they put their own ads like in their own TikToks [videos], which I don’t find that as advertising (.) it’s just like they’re

putting put their product there to spread awareness of it (.) they're not trying to get people to buy it, but to let people know that they sell it (.) but if they're putting someone else's [product] in, it's a bit confusing but they're not letting them know that they sell, it's like they [the creator] has probably got one of their products before and that means they've bought it (.) they're saying that they've bought it or they've been given it, and getting it they say 'oh this is really good you should go get or if you're into this sort of stuff I'd definitely recommend this for you', I feel like that's more advertising than [when they promote] their own stuff."

As an exploratory study, it was important to begin data collection with a broad focus in terms of different marketing formats to cover as much ground as possible, whilst also allowing the participants themselves to guide the discussions based on their own perceptions and experiences, rather than by parameters pre-set by the researcher. However, this presented two challenges, first in terms of exploring a wide range of methods within the scope of a single PhD project and second in terms of deciding upon the most appropriate way to ask children about their understanding of newer formats without inadvertently providing too many suggestions, clues or information that could have influenced or biased their responses.

Therefore, in the interests of achieving the specific objectives set in this research (see Section 4.1.1.1), especially the exploration of advertising formats that do not rely upon recognition, a deliberate decision was made to include some specific questions on embedded advertising in the peer interviews, as this is where there is currently a distinct lack of knowledge in terms of children's understanding compared to both traditional and explicit online advertising formats. Obviously, this decision was influenced by the research objectives and the content analysis work, hence the inclusion of the YouTube storyboarding task in the creative workshops, but it was also further justified by participants' own emphasis on online advertising that was evident during group discussions in the first phase of the fieldwork.

4.2.5 Children's Understanding of the *purpose* of "Advertising"

As described in the literature review Chapter, almost all of the definitions of advertising literacy, both historical and contemporary, acknowledge that there are two cognitive 'skills', which are central to an individual's ability to understand advertising. To reiterate, the first 'skill' is the ability to distinguish commercialised material from other material - in other words - to be able to recognise material with an underlying commercial agenda from material designed to inform or entertain. The second 'skill' is the ability to understand such commercial agendas in terms of both the selling intent and persuasive intent of the material, in other words the purpose of the advertisement.

Almost all of the children who participated in this research were able to correctly describe the fundamental purpose of advertising (as they perceived it) during the research. Most participants shared the idea that advertising primarily exists to encourage people to spend their money and purchase things. In addition, there was also a shared understanding amongst participants that advertising helps companies and businesses to grow their customer base and make more profits, articulated in simple terms by several participants for example:

IT6P2: "I think they [the company] do that [advertise] because they want money"

IT6P3: "So if you like buy a toy then they want like more and more (.) like you'll buy their product"

IT12P2: "So they can get more money and get more stuff"

Whilst these responses are not complex, they certainly reflect an awareness of the selling intent of advertising, based on the references to encouraging people to spend money and buy things both demonstrating the cognitive dimension of advertising literacy and conceptual knowledge of advertising. Furthermore, these responses needed very little consideration from participants, in that they were given quickly without hesitation, suggesting that participants were confident that they were providing 'correct' answers.

Additionally, when asked specifically why advertisers might want to target children like themselves, participants in both phases of the fieldwork suggested that this was because children were 'easy targets' for advertisers, who could be encouraged to request advertised items from their parents. For example:

IT7P1: "Because kids, they get attracted really easily and then like parents (.) they [kids] just give [their parents] the puppy dog eyes and then they just go 'oh alright'"

IT5P2 "Because kids are gullible, and you want to follow the crowd (.) like if your phone (.) if it had a unicorn that like walks and talks and stuff like that"

This was the case for traditional forms of marketing, such as out-of-home advertisements and retail displays:

W2P3: "it depends like, if you see it, or your parents, ask you like for example, if you see it on a billboard and it's something you like, you're obviously gonna be like 'oh I really want that', or if you see something on the shop but you like it and your parents don't like it, and you say, they're still going to get it [for you]"

And in an online context;

IT8P1: “Maybe because they think like we’re kids (.) so we might ask our parents ‘oh can we get that from that company?’ and they might like, erm like get like they might put it on so they can get money...so it might be like kids (.) and then if kids see that, and like [think] ‘my favourite YouTuber’s got that’ then they might want that because you want to have the same things as them”

On the surface, these responses seemingly indicate that children consider themselves to be “gullible” and that they believe they are influenced by advertising. However, it was interesting to explore how this influence may manifest itself as a desire to “follow the crowd” or to emulate a specific person as is evidenced here, i.e. “my favourite YouTuber’s got that... so you want to have the same thing as them”.

Further analysis of the data indicated that exposure to an advertisement itself may not be the sole reason for children’s desire to acquire a specific product, rather it is the ways in which the symbolic aspects of the product and its social associations are communicated that influences children’s interpretation of an advertisement and their subsequent purchase behaviour. Despite the evolution of advertising literacy as a multidimensional concept, it is not easy to explain these findings in terms of current dimensions of attitudinal advertising literacy (Rozendaal et al., 2011; Hudders et al., 2017), which only focus on two negative attitudes towards the practice of advertising in general; ‘scepticism’ and ‘disliking of advertising’ (Hudders et al., 2017).

Hence, these findings are significant because they offer new insights into where positive attitudes such as ‘liking of advertising’ might come from, how they are reinforced and the role they play in enacting ‘critical responses’. More specifically, these findings highlight that children’s attitudes towards source characteristics are particularly influential on the way that advertisements are interpreted. This is interesting because the debate has become somewhat skewed towards mistrust of advertisers and advertising in general and on balance, studies exploring persuasive tactics and messaging techniques are less common.

4.2.6 Children’s Perceptions of Marketing and Advertising

In terms of the contemporary media environment, there was a shared perception amongst the children in this study that ‘advertising’ (encompassing all forms of marketing communications as they understood it) is everywhere. Many participants described how they felt that they were “always” coming into contact with advertising in their everyday lives. For example;

*W1P3: “Erm the Haribo adverts and hoovers because I **always** see the Haribo advert on and um it's a really funny advert, and the hoovers advert, there's **always** an advert for Shark hoovers, and it's **always** on TV”*

The repetition of the phrase “*always*” here suggests that this participant has seen both the Haribo advertisement and the advertisement for Shark Hoovers a number of times. This notion of repetition and of ‘always’ seeing advertisements was frequently mentioned by participants in relation to television advertising specifically, further supporting the suggestion that television advertisements are easily recognisable by children.

Participants explained how once they became aware of a particular brand, they felt that they would notice that brand and its associated promotional material more often. As one participant explained, she felt that she was “always” noticing advertisements for the French luxury brand *Chanel* in retail environments and on television after becoming aware of the brand via her mother, who wore *Chanel* perfumes:

*W1P1: “Erm (.) my mum **always** buys Chanel and um (.) I **always** see it in shops that we go to because my mum **always** wants to buy it and there's **always** an advert next to it and there's loads of perfume adverts and they're **always** on tv [television] and each time I go on tv I **always** see a different perfume advert”*

In addition to noticing advertisements in retail environments and on television, many participants echoed the perception of frequent exposure to repetitive advertising online too. For example, repetition of the advertisements shown on YouTube:

W3P6: “like if it (.) it frequently pops out, every time it's an ad [advertisement] it's the same ad”

The consensus seemed to be that the repetitive nature of advertising was one of the main reasons why advertising was considered to be ‘everywhere’.

4.2.6.1. Advertising is Annoying

In addition, the repetitive nature of advertising was one of the main reasons participants perceived it as annoying. For example, one participant, a 10-year-old boy, commented on how he felt that the consistent repetition of certain advertisements on television had become “annoying”, which was heightened if he perceived the advertisements as not being relevant to him. In this excerpt, he articulates his feelings towards the television advertisements for

‘LOL Surprise’ toys (i.e. miniature dolls and accessories primarily targeted at girls aged 4-14 years old).

W2P8: “There’s all the adverts on telly that are annoying (.) like on kid’s tv shows when you’re watching Nickelodeon and stuff like that (.) it’s like erm (.) girls stuff, it’s always girls stuff, like Furbies, I don’t even know what that is, there’s Barbie, erm and stuff like that, it’s really annoying, there’s one that like, is the most, it’s like LOL [Surprise], I think... LOL surprise, it’s always on all the time whenever I watch TV, kids TV, it’s always in my head... I’m like, please don’t be another LOL ad, because it repeats and repeats (.) ‘LOL surprise, unlock this toy, LOL surprise, look at this erm, do not eat its hair or something, buy one get one free!’”

Whilst it must be noted that the inclusion of “do not eat its hair” is factually inaccurate as it is not actually a phrase that features in any LOL Surprise advertisement, it did generate a lot of laughter in the room at the time. During analysis, it appeared that this participant is initially describing a sense of annoyance at what he feels is a bias in favour of advertisements for “girl’s stuff” on children’s television. After he mentions the children’s toy “Furbies” he is quick to clarify that he does not “even know what it is”. Arguably, he does know about the existence of ‘Furbies’ to be able to reference them, but perhaps he is trying to assert that a Furby toy is not of interest to him. This is echoed in his perception of LOL Surprise toys, where the whole concept appears to be ridiculous to him, as suggested by his “do not eat its hair” remark. He seems to consider these advertisements as irrelevant to him, and his perception that there is an excessive number of advertisements for LOL Surprise toys and “girls’ stuff” on children’s television adds to his sense of annoyance.

When participants were asked follow-up questions by the researcher as to *why* they found certain advertisements annoying, one of the reasons given was the feeling of being unable to ‘opt out’ of watching or listening to something ‘irrelevant’ as described below.

W2P4: “Well.. if they’re [the advertisements are] unskippable, well... if there’s the same company just over and over again, it just gets annoying”

W1P3: “And (.) and this is a thing that I can personally say (.) everywhere there’s an ad [advertisement] they’re often always annoying”

There were also some specific advertisements mentioned that were clearly more unpopular with the participants than others, which generated heated discussions and strong negative opinions across the workshops. For example, the Grammar-checking software application; ‘Grammarly’, which is frequently advertised on YouTube, was particularly unpopular with participants.

W2P5: "Especially Grammarly ones"

W2P4: [in response to P5] - "Grammarly's the worst!"

W3P4: "So like where it like advertises it but there's not too many adverts (.) there's loads of like Simply Piano and Grammarly adverts and there's just too many of them and it makes me not want to download it even more"

In addition, another reason suggested by participants as to why advertising was perceived as annoying was its intrusive nature. This was particularly evident in children who play a lot of games on their various electronic devices. For example,

W2P2: "Especially if you're like on a game, like I play this game called 'Snowball IO' and every game, every other match, there's an advert (.) it just goes off and I just want to get on with the game, they take like 30 seconds all the time"

W3P10: "Sometimes the ads finish and it's all about playing the game part but you can't actually the play because it pops up 'download this app' so you have to get rid of that and then there still could be half a minute left and like I don't want to waste that time"

W3P2: I don't like it when they do it [pop up advertisements] like for a really long time and you have to wait like ten minutes and because there's loads of ads and when it's the same ad, if you actually wanted the game you would have downloaded it"

During analysis, it became apparent that those children who felt that online advertisements frequently interrupted their gameplay and wasted their time tended to have quite strong negative views about the practice of advertising in general, not just the specific advertisements that they encountered themselves supporting previous research. Indeed, this sense of 'annoyance' was shared by many participants. Analysis suggests that this is potentially related to two factors. The first factor relates to the over exposure to advertising in general. For example, the perception that children are frequently interrupted by advertising, especially when they are online.

The second factor relates to children's exposure to advertisements that are perceived as irrelevant. Participants explained how a significant amount of the 'sponsored' content that they are exposed to online is of no relevance to them. Participants explained that they would often see advertisements for products that were completely unrelated to the content they were watching on social media. During analysis, it became apparent that the words 'irrelevant', 'not relevant' and 'boring' were all used by participants as different ways to describe recognisable online content that was clearly targeted at an adult audience but not necessarily

of an adult nature, such as advertisements for financial services or household appliances. Unsurprisingly, participants explained that they would typically choose to ignore advertisements for products or services that they were not interested in.

W3P5: “Erm I personally just tend to ignore them [the advertisements], I don’t really see them as like a need to acknowledge them”

W3P6: “Er I’d just ignore the adverts really, it’s not really what I’m looking for”

Where participants interpreted such online content as a form of advertising, either because it was explicitly or obviously ‘sponsored’ or accompanied by a disclosure cue such as ‘#ad’ or ‘#paidad’, many participants expressed a desire to “skip” or “scroll” past such content. However, not all advertisements can be avoided or ‘skipped’ online, and participants generally expressed their frustration at this.

These findings appear to lend support for one of the most common attitudinal dimensions of advertising literacy as suggested by the literature, which is ‘dislike of advertising’ (Hudders et al., 2017; De Jans, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018; van Dam and van Reijmersdal 2019).

Other participants discussed seeing content that they would consider “inappropriate” for children, but when questioned about this, most of the participants had used the word inappropriate to refer to content that they felt was irrelevant to them rather than content that might have been unsuitable, offensive or distressing. Of the 41 children who participated in this study, almost all of them accessed the main YouTube website, with the prevailing view amongst these participants (aged 9-11 years) that the alternative ‘YouTube Kids’ website (where there are no advertisements), was intended for much younger children (i.e. those aged 5 and under). Therefore, they felt that the content on that app was not likely to be of interest to them.

Although, it appears that there is still a risk of children’s exposure to inappropriate content when using the main YouTube website as opposed to the YouTube Kids website, despite the current restrictions on online advertising in the UK as outlined in Section 2.3.5. For example, one participant recalled seeing an advertisement for an 18-rated horror film (“It 2”) whilst watching an unrelated video on YouTube about the game Fortnite. Others made references to the potential personalisation of online advertisements, believing that if the content was aimed

at a 12-year-old child for example, then the advertisements shown would also be aimed at a 12-year-old audience, yet this is not always the case.

In terms of online content generally, it is important to emphasise here that very few children in this research reported that they had been exposed to content online that could be considered harmful to those under the age of 18, such as content containing violence, nudity, profanity or drug and alcohol abuse. However, there was some evidence that certain platforms in the online environment, such as YouTube and TikTok, are falling short of television as a medium in terms of the restrictions over the type of advertisements that children can see.

4.2.6.2 Children's Misperceptions of Advertising

When it comes to online marketing, one of the most significant findings from this research is that there appears to be an incorrect assumption amongst children that online content always makes it clear when there is an underlying commercial agenda. For example, as one participant described:

IT8P1: "It would probably be quite hard to tell [it was advertising] if it didn't say, but I'm pretty sure it has to say (.) like if someone's advertising something then they have to say it's advertising, like if they don't then I'm not sure what happens but I'm pretty sure they have to say it's advertising"

The main thing that caught the researcher's attention was the participant's underlying assumption that advertising always has to communicate that it is advertising. As this participant describes, her perception of advertising is that it is either obvious or recognisable, or it is not considered to be advertising. During analysis it became clear that this misconception was echoed by a number of participants.

IT10P3: "First of all it's illegal [not to disclose advertising in games] so I'm sure it would be somewhere and also they would probably point out at least a tiny flaw if it wasn't sponsored"

Some participants appeared to equate a lack of advertising disclosures in content with more genuine motivations, for example assuming that influencers might just want to "spread awareness" about a particular brand or product as suggested earlier, or simply share their opinions rather than specifically trying to encourage sales.

Related to this was a perception that social media content was not as believable as more established advertising formats. For example,

*IT10P3: "If you find stuff off social media don't just believe it, that person could be saying anything. I believe stuff from **real** adverts"*

SS: What do you mean by 'real' adverts?

IT10P3: TV adverts

And a perception that there were no advertisements within online games like *Roblox* and *Fortnite*:

W2P10: "Er... no because it's an online game, and you can't get adverts in online games"

W2P7: "Yeah like in online games you can't get adverts, but on like your iPad [you can]"

These findings are interesting because they suggest that recognition of commercial intent in online content may influence how it is interpreted by children. The use of the term "sponsored" is just one way that advertisers communicate the commercial nature of their content online. Participants believed that without these clues;

IT1P1: "You could probably, might, be able to tell [it's advertising] but usually it says 'sponsored' and 'ads'"

Hence, the association that advertisers "usually" communicate the commercial intent of content in some way.

IT11P1: "If you're filming a YouTube video and you like, get a can of Pepsi (.) that has to be sponsored by Pepsi and it's pretty obvious when they say that, 'amazing, sponsored by Pepsi!'"

These findings suggest that there could be associations between the explicit communication of commercial intent and the perceived relevance of online content. This could indicate that content that is perceived as "non-sponsored" (regardless of its underlying commercial nature) may be interpreted differently, and potentially, more positively by children.

W2P6: I think, they're trying to get merchandise, or they're trying to get you to use their "support a creator" code or they're trying to, and I remember watching this video and it was about art and it was like "I, I used this ruler by blah blah blah" and "I used this pencil by the same company, I also used this sharpener by - same company and I used this by... the same company" and it was just advertising but it, but it was basically advertising but it wasn't exactly saying it was advertising"

SS: Yeah it's a really good point, would it still persuade you to buy like, that pencil and that?

W2P6: “Yeah”

One reason for this preference could be a perception that ‘sponsored’ videos typically include subject matter that is not of interest. For example,

W3P4: “I like watching the ones [videos] that are not sponsored more because they just carry on, because if they’re sponsored they usually stop half way through just to like carry on with the energy drink or something what I don’t even care about, I just try and skip it until it goes... it’s just so boring like, I don’t want them to show me about this thing that I’m not into, they do it for shock, they do it for like aaaaaages...”

Inevitably, the literature on this topic has been enhanced since the beginning of this PhD project in 2018 but remains relatively under-researched from both interdisciplinary and qualitative perspectives. As emphasised in early Chapters of this thesis, advertising literacy research has primarily focused on children’s recognition of advertising in terms of its various forms as a key indicator of their understanding (i.e. cognitive dimension). Furthermore, children’s attitudes towards advertising and their ability to be critical of commercial agendas have only become part of these definitions more recently (i.e. attitudinal dimension). Despite this, children’s advertising literacy is still first and foremost framed as a cognitive defence mechanism against unwanted advertising effects.

In this context, the participant is referring to content that did not explicitly state that it was sponsored, rather than content that was actually genuine. That is a critical distinction to make as it suggests that children may have a preference for content that they do not *perceive* to be advertising even if it actually is. This could mean that they may be more receptive to its commercial message as a result. Therefore, these insights are particularly significant in terms of enriching the existing literature relating to children’s understanding of online advertising formats and are returned to in the following Discussion Chapter.

4.2.7 Summary of Theme One: The Omnipresence of Omnichannel Advertising

To summarise the first theme presented in this Chapter, the findings reveal several novel insights relating to children’s awareness and perceptions of contemporary advertising and brands. In terms of children’s understanding and perceptions of advertising in general, these findings suggest that whilst they appear to have a high level of awareness of what advertising is and how it works, they also seem to have quite a low tolerance for it. This negative view

appears to be based on shared perceptions that the overall practice of advertising is annoying, disruptive and intrusive. Furthermore, as expressed by many participants, advertising - in its most recognisable form - is considered to be unavoidable.

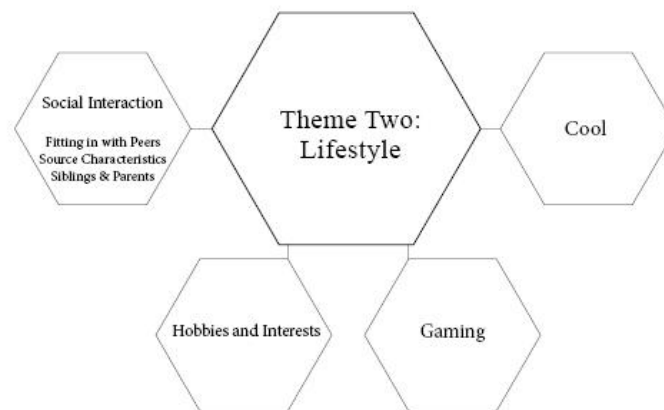
The general consensus appears to be that there are too many advertisements and that these advertisements are everywhere (except in online games), meaning that commercialised material and content has become somewhat inescapable for children in today's society. To some extent, modern technology has given children some control over the advertisements they see. For example, the ability to 'fast-forward' through the advertisements on television on demand services, and 'skip' certain advertisements on YouTube. However, there are still many instances where this functionality is unavailable, and children feel frustrated by this. Furthermore, exposure to commercialised content has become a regular feature of children's everyday experiences both online and offline, yet recognising embedded marketing is apparently much more difficult for them. This difficulty appears to be linked with the shared misperception that online advertising has to make it clear that it is advertising in the same way that offline advertising does.

These findings suggest that if online content does not explicitly communicate its underlying commercial intent in some way, for example, in the form of a verbal, textual or visual disclosure cue, then it could potentially be interpreted differently by children. In other words, where a disclosure cue is disguised, hidden or missing, then children may actually perceive commercialised content as a genuine review or recommendation for a specific product, game or brand. Alternatively, children may also perceive this "non-sponsored" content simply as another form of entertainment, which supports suggestions from previous research that the lines between commercialised content and entertainment are becoming increasingly blurred (Freeman and Shapiro, 2014). As a result, children may have more positive associations and attitudes towards this type of advertising (Hudders et al., 2017). As evidenced later in this Chapter in Themes Two (4.3) and Three (4.4), participants also value authenticity and honesty and appear to place a level of trust in the source of a message when it is not considered to be obviously commercially motivated. Hence, they may be more receptive to a message, a promoted product or a featured brand when it is communicated in this way. The specific implications of these findings in terms of children's advertising literacy theory are discussed in the following Chapter.

4.3 Theme two: Marketing's Role in Children's Lifestyle and Identity Formation

The second theme in these findings; *Marketing's role in children's lifestyle and identity formation* relates to one of the central arguments of this research - that consumption is inherently social. Labelled simply as 'Lifestyle' during data analysis, Figure 4.6 illustrates the underlying subcategories of this overarching theme.

Figure 4.6 Key Findings from Theme Two



(Source: Author's own work).

4.3.1 Introduction to Theme Two: *Marketing's Role in Children's Lifestyle and Identity Formation*

The significant underlying elements of this theme began to emerge during analysis of participants' own explanations of themselves as consumers and their own experiences of the marketplace, both in real-life settings and in virtual environments. The overall theme began to take shape during the 2nd and 3rd cycles of coding, where 'child' codes from the data (i.e. those given to passages of transcriptions that related to potential topics of interest, such as 'fitting-in' and 'social interaction') were grouped together into related areas and then amalgamated into relevant sub-themes relating to children's lifestyles.

As evidenced in Theme One, children's awareness and understanding of some of the more covert formats of contemporary advertising do not appear to be as evident or as well established as their awareness of traditional forms of marketing such as advertising. Therefore, the decision was made to include some broad-ranging interview questions about children's perceptions of the media in general, as well as the inclusion of questions relating child-targeted marketing specifically, on the basis that this approach would help to draw out unique insights into participants' own identities and behaviour as consumers.

4.3.2 The Million-Dollar Question - "*What sorts of things do you think are cool right now?*"

The ineffable nature of 'coolness' has continued to puzzle marketers and scholars alike for many years (Nancarrow and Nancarrow, 2002; Schor, 2005; Rahman, 2013) not least because of its ever-changing and ambiguous nature, but also because of its highly lucrative potential as a marketable commodity. Hence, the researcher was keen to explore the concept of 'cool' with participants, to understand its relative importance and consider if contemporary advertising plays a role in determining and communicating to children what is, and what should and should not be considered 'cool'.

During the interviews, one of the first questions participants were asked was about their perceptions of 'cool' and what sorts of things were considered to be cool, desirable and popular with children of a similar age at the time of the research. For example,

SS: So, what sort of things do you think are cool right now?

IT11P1: "Do you mean, like popular?"

SS: Yeah, anything that you think is popular with kids your age

IT11P1: "Erm, football, McDonalds, Netflix and socials"

SS: Socials? Like social media?

IT11P1: Yeah

Having conducted a review of grey literature prior to commencing the fieldwork, the researcher was aware that most children in the UK have access to the Internet at home, and that the majority of the participants in this research were highly likely to have access to their own electronic devices. Therefore, it was relatively unsurprising that almost all of the

participants who were interviewed (N=30) felt that ‘using the Internet’ and ‘social media’ were considered to be ‘cool’. The researcher was also aware that at the time of this research (November 2021) in the aftermath of the Coronavirus pandemic, these children were also likely to be using these devices more frequently and for longer periods of time than they had before the national lockdowns were imposed in the UK in March 2020 when most schools were closed to the majority of pupils. These periods of “*lockdown*” (IT2P1) and the effect on participants’ device usage were mentioned in the interviews, for example:

IT2P1: “Football and friends, but since lockdown more like my iPad, just because (.)”

4.3.2.1 Gaming

The content analysis had also indicated that online gaming had become a particularly popular leisure activity for children, both as a way of alleviating boredom and as a way of staying in touch with their friends when they were unable to attend school. This was emphasised in the interviews, where gaming was frequently described as ‘cool’. For example,

IT1P2: “Like sometimes if you see something really cool then everyone’s talking about it, it might make you click on it and download it even if you don’t like it because everyone’s playing it, you might just want to not feel left out”

IT1P1: “The reason I downloaded Minecraft was it looked really fun, and I was watching it on YouTube so I saw it then...”

IT5P2: “My friends like the same stuff as me, like Off White, Nike Air shoes, and gaming on Xbox, PS5, Nintendo, phones, er we like hot wheels and watching TV, and some football stuff”

IT7P2: “Like [Minecraft is] it’s very popular, I don’t really know why but lots of people like to play it and Mr Beast [YouTuber] also plays it and there’s lots of adverts of him on the side, when you click a game, there’s lots of games that you like and Mr Beast is like “type in a code” and you get to join his group”

IT11P3: “Gaming is really popular, but me and my friends, we meet each other, we like football, and we like to get football things, football kits”

Whilst it could be argued that video games are not yet considered to be a well-established advertising channel from a research perspective, the content analysis had revealed that there is actually an increasing amount of commercialisation within popular children’s games such as *Fortnite* and *Roblox*, in terms of the opportunities to purchase branded items and customise the appearance of ‘avatars’. Based on analysis of the creative workshop

discussions, gaming was also clearly a significant leisure activity for the participants in this research, but there was a shared perception that these games did not contain any advertisements.

Therefore, the researcher wanted to build on these discussions to find out why gaming was considered 'cool' and explore participants' understanding of some of the ways that these games are marketed to children, which could reveal insights into their awareness of the potential commercialisation of gameplay.

One frequently given reason for the popularity of gaming was the ability to talk to friends in games such as *Fortnite*, *Minecraft* and *Roblox*. As this excerpt from interview seven illustrates:

IT7P1: "Also you get to play with your friends even though you can't see them, so we cannot see them but we can talk to them and stuff and I think that's made it [Roblox] popular, it's not as popular as Minecraft though, that's still the most popular"

SS: "And when you're on Roblox then are you able to talk to each other in the class?"

IT7P1: "Yeah like privately"

IT7P2: "Yeah I talk to my friends [on Roblox]"

IT7P1: "You have to friend them [add them as a friend] first"

SS: "Ok, so as well as it being a fun game and things it sounds like it's quite a social thing too?"

IT7P1: "Yeah you can also invite people to a game too (.) I normally know who they are"

IT7P2: "Once a stranger tried to friend me and I was like 'who are they?'"

The communication features of video games were also described by other participants throughout the interviews. For example:

IT2P2: "In the morning when I wake up if I have like a little bit of time then I go run downstairs and then go on my iPad for a bit, and then go see if I haven't already, see if I've got any messages on my iPad or watch anime and stuff on the TV before I go, my mum does my hair, just because (.) [whispers - I want to do my own hair] [laughs] Erm (.) put my shoes on when everybody's ready and then I get in the car, then we go to school then I go home and I go on my iPad"

SS: “You play Roblox, yeah? And when you say, you check if you’ve got any messages, is that on iMessages or ...?”

IT2P2: “Messages on Roblox”

SS: “Messages on Roblox, OK”

Participants in later interviews reinforced the suggestion that games like Fortnite were considered ‘cool’ simply because they were popular with many children. This extract from interview four highlights a conversation about the appeal of certain video games:

SS: “What sorts of things do you think are cool right now?”

IT4P1: “Um, video games because I’m able to play one, erm I’m able to play 12 [rated games] and over, but I’m able to play like one particular 16 [rated] game that I have, that I want to play, so I really like playing 12s and I’m more addicted to them than say like 3s [age 3+ rated games] but still FIFA, is good to play like once in a while and like sometimes (.) but one particular game that I really like playing is Fortnite because all my friends play it and think it’s a good game and right now billions of people are playing it”

In terms of the ways these games are marketed to children, this participant explained how he felt that the games targeted at older children were more appealing to him than those aimed at younger children:

SS: “I’m quite interested in something you’ve mentioned about the games, how important is it - you know when you’re looking at the age of a game - so from what you’re saying you find the older ones more appealing, like a 12+ or 16 +, that’s more appealing than the 3 or the 7, why is that do you think?”

IT4P1: Er well 12s I play so much, but 16s or 18s, even if my parents allowed me I wouldn’t be much interested in those er, erm, I don’t really fancy those games, like games that are, is a challenge that you have to win or lose and it’s like not survival, but well like FIFA isn’t, and (.) I wouldn’t play 16s if I wasn’t allowed like, let’s say for example, GTA [Grand Theft Auto] that’s an 18 [rated game], erm I wouldn’t play it unless my dad or mum said I could, so once in a while, so once every few months I played, so one time I was with my mum, she doesn’t let me play 18s or anything like that she said, ‘yeah you can go on it for an hour or so’, like I’ve not been at my mum’s every single week I played it three times (.) I wouldn’t play it without an adult, like (.) I went to my cousin’s house and erm he was there with me, he’s around 18, he was 17 or 18 back around then and he was with me... erm and just making sure I didn’t do anything bad [laughs] I was just messing around, I didn’t know what to do, I wouldn’t play any 16s or 18s without a person of that age there unless they told me I could play it”

However, as the participant clarifies in his responses here, despite thinking that the games targeted towards older children are more “addictive”, he is not actually allowed to play 16+ or 18+ rated video games without having the prior approval or supervision of an adult.

In addition, like several other participants in separate interviews (not just the two mentioned here), the football-themed video game ‘FIFA’ was still considered to be ‘cool’, even though it has an age rating of 7+ years.

Other participants also indicated that many pre-teenage children considered it ‘cool’ to play video games that were marketed at older children (such as those games with age advisory ratings of 12+ or 16+ years). For example,

IT5P1: “I think the 12+ games are getting more popular and cooler (.) I like video games because it makes you good at computing”

It is important to note here that the interview participants were either 10 or 11 years old at the time of this research, but the perceived popularity of the video game Fortnite for instance (which currently has an age rating of 12 years +) amongst their friendship groups and with other children their own age was evident from the very first interview. For example:

IT1P1: “I don't really play 18s or 16s [rated games] I just play like 12s and that type of games, like Spiderman, but I like Spiderman as long as [my friend] plays it (.) because I like talking to my friends but I'd probably play a bit of FIFA, but it's not like I want to always play, play, play (.) it's that I want to still be a part of the group and feel like I'm not left out (.) but not, I don't want to play, spend all my time on the game”

IT1P2: “Everyone was talking about Fortnite and stuff but I know that it's a 12+ game and it's sensible not to get it and just wait until I'm older and it's going to be next year when I'm going to be 12 so it's just a little bit of time that I have to wait... Everyone was talking about it so I know quite a bit about it, it's like really popular with everyone but I don't play it myself”

SS: “Do you think some of those older games are more popular than the younger-age ones?”

IT1P2: “Yeah”

IT1P1: “Yeah”

SS: “Why do you think that is?”

IT1P1: “Erm the only younger age one that I think is most popular is usually like Roblox or Minecraft”

IT1P2: “Because I think sometimes they’re more addictive the kind of like, shooting, they’re just a bit more fun than like building stuff or a bit more like ‘action-y’ (.) and what I’ve noticed with the younger games, like FIFA, you can’t play with anyone, but with the older games you can like play with your friends and like play online”

IT1P1: “They’re good for like a certain age, like 3 + but the older ones seem to be like what everyone’s talking about because like more like shooting like what [IT1P2] said”

What is interesting in this exchange here is that the first participant (IT1P1) indicates that he still wants to be “*part of the group*” and not feel “*left out*” by his friends because he does not necessarily want to “*always play, play, play*” video games all the time. His friend (IT1P2) also reiterates that “*Everyone was talking about Fortnite*” but that so far he has managed to resist any pressure to play the game until he is older.

Here, both participants offer explanations as why video games marketed towards older children are popular with younger children, with one suggestion that it could be due to the nature of the gameplay being more active than passive (i.e. “*shooting*” as opposed to “*building stuff*”) and two, that these games allow players to interact with their friends whilst playing, a feature that they think is missing from games aimed at a younger audience.

Like video games, electronic devices in general were also considered to be “addictive” by participants. For example,

IT8P1: “Yeah because you can like play on it and text and it does become quite addictive when you're on it and some kids who are little can have like tablets and stuff... It's like some kids they could just get on the phone and like play a game or like text somebody and if they are texting their friend it could just go on for ages like the conversation could go on and they'd just be in their room for ages but if they're on a game it could like then doing something and then they just lost, they may want to do it again and again and then every day when you come back home [from school] you're just on your phone”

IT8P2: “Yeah sometimes, if you complete a level and then you complete another one you get stuff that's like better and better until you get to the best things”

IT8P1: “Yeah and if you do a level and then switch your phone off the level might not save, so you have to do it all over again so that might be a way that it might be addictive”

4.3.2.2 Children’s Hobbies and Interests

‘Cool’ was frequently qualified by mass popularity (i.e. lots of people having it or doing it). Aside from gaming, participants tended to equate ‘coolness’ with their own specific interests,

which included sports that they played themselves or sports matches and competitions that they liked to watch. As indicated earlier in Chapter two, marketers have always taken children's preferences and sensibilities seriously (Kleine, 2005) and marketers are increasingly using personal data about users' interests to target the advertisements shown to young people on social media sites like YouTube (Desimpelaere et al., 2022). Hence, it was interesting to see how 'Cool' was also associated with participants' hobbies and activities that appealed to them personally, as well as to their friends. For example:

IT12P1: "Like [boy's name] like's basketball, he's one of my friends, [other boy's name] my other friend, I think he likes Marvel quite a lot because he's like, his profile picture on WhatsApp is just a Marvel character, I think he was Loki at some point, erm and [IT12P2] likes horses, she loves horses".

SS: And what about you, what do you think, what sorts of things are cool right now?

IT12P3: Fortnite

SS: Fortnite, yeah?

IT12P3: Yeah and Minecraft, like social media, and FIFA 22 and Roblox

SS: OK, so like video games that you play online?

IT12P3: Yeah, I like Earthshot, that's cool

SS: Earthshot, OK

IT12P3: Also, I think like sports, rugby, football, cricket, I play sports so I think they're cool

SS: Ok so sports, yeah?

IT12P3: Yeah

IT12P2: "Yeah and I like world records, they're cool, I also like erm like adventure stuff, and sports too like [IT12P3] said (.) so I do horse riding, and actually, I just love horses and animals erm, I think wolves are cool, and stags and tigers, and like nature, trees and stuff"

IT10P3: "I think they [advertisers] know like, that you have taste in that stuff, like 'it will suit you cool kids'"

Certain brands (as highlighted in Section 4.2.3) were also considered to be 'cool' if they were perceived as being popular with children. During analysis it began to emerge that it was the social elements of games, products and clothing that were often given as reasons for this

popularity, suggesting that there are links between something being considered ‘cool’ and its social nature. Furthermore, ‘Coolness’ was also associated with people, in the sense that a person could be considered ‘cool’ as a result of both the tangible things and the qualities that they possessed.

IT8P1: “And also they might like see it like basketball players where some really like cool shoes and they might think ‘oooooh I like those so I might get a pair’ and it might like, spread around as well”.

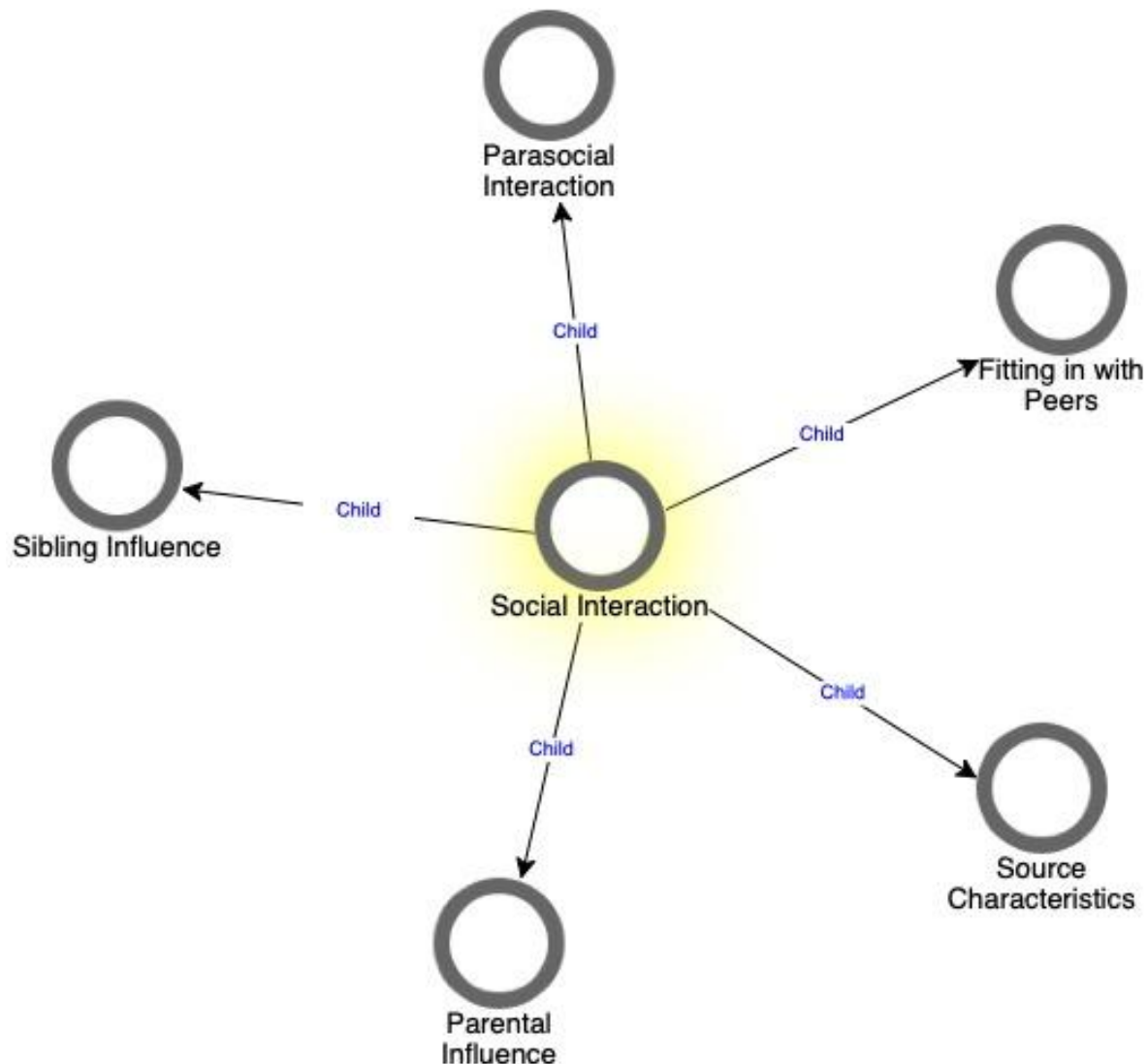
4.3.3 Social Interaction

One of the advantages of incorporating a sociological perspective on consumption into the exploration of children’s advertising literacy is that it enables a broader exploration of the topic than from just a cognitive developmental perspective. Specifically, the interdisciplinary approach followed in this PhD research facilitated an exploration of the social nature of children’s consumption, as well as the *context* and *content* of contemporary advertising formats to address the theoretical shortcomings of advertising literacy theories based purely on individual cognitive abilities. As outlined by Cook, (2008, p235) researchers should “recognise children as social subjects and social objects in the world - as subjects who have knowledge and desire for consumer goods”. Hence, participants were asked about their own preferences for brands, goods and services, followed up with questions designed to tease out the possible reasons for those preferences. These insights also formed a fundamental part of data analysis as initial frames for categorising and synthesising the potential interrelations between children’s media use, their own lifestyle (i.e. their interests, interactions and influences) and their understanding of contemporary advertising, which were also used to build this theme.

As mentioned previously in Chapter 3, within the overarching second Theme; ‘Lifestyle’ a significant sub-theme emerged relating to social interaction, as identified in Figure 4.7 (reproduced from Figure 3.9 in Chapter 3).

This diagram shows several concepts that were coded in the data including; Parasocial interaction, fitting in with peers, source characteristics, parental and sibling influences.

Figure 4.7 Concepts relating to the sub theme of ‘Social Interaction.’



(Source: Author’s own work).

4.3.3.1 Fitting in with Peers

During the interviews, children were asked about the importance of fitting in with their friends and peers. Answers to these questions were mixed, with some participants explaining that they felt it was very important to be seen to fit in with everyone else, and others pointing out that having solid friendships was more important to them than fitting in or “*following the crowd*” as was evidenced earlier in this section.

In relation to their consumer behaviour, the influence of friends and peers was mentioned often during the interviews. For example,

IT3P2: They’ll say like ‘oh I got it’, they bring it to school, you’ll be like ‘oh I need that’, like even now you don’t really look at what you’ve already got (.) like I’ve got a

lot of books at home but I still want to buy a new book but my mum always says just read all the books you have you don't need a new one and I'm like 'noooooooooo''

"IT5P3: I am influenced by my friends because at first my friends started playing with fidgets [fidget toys] and I'm pretty into it now after (.) And I've started buying them"

Overall, participants placed a high level of importance on the opinions of their friends and explained that they would typically pay attention to and respect friends' opinions on recommendations for new products, games and toys. In terms of participants' purchase behaviour, this also extended to providing advice to their friends "not to buy" something if they had "bought something bad" themselves (IT5P3).

The influence of peers was also discussed by participants in relation to 'trends' and the motivation to acquire an item just because lots of other children had it. For example,

IT11P1: "...if it's a trend people would want to be like other people, so they buy the product"

Regardless of subject matter, analysis suggested that the concept of 'cool' was inextricably linked to fitting in. Furthermore, not being cool, or not keeping up with the trends could lead to negative social experiences, such as being left out and feelings of jealousy and envy.

IT6P1 "Well you know when people see something that's so cool? And I'm going to tell the truth because that actually happened to me before, when they see something like, 'aww that's so cool' or 'aww I really want that' or 'aww I wish I could do that' they start getting jealous and then they getting angry and then they start asking their parents for it, whatever they want and dad just ends up getting it"

IT8P2: "If they don't have really cool stuff it might like make them sad and some kids like might be bullied saying 'ha ha you don't have things like this' "

IT9P1: "Sometimes it makes you wish you had the thing they are unboxing, reviews aren't very entertaining"

IT11P1: "I like it because sometimes I can actually buy it and use it when I want to like 'wow so cool' but the thing I don't like about it is that the people who have the thing will or could show it off and it makes me jealous... I don't like when they are opening cool stuff and I don't have it. It is like rubbing it in our faces"

Elsewhere, other participants discussed the concept of fitting in, in relation to the lifestyles of others portrayed on social media such as TikTok. For example,

IT12P2: "They're just a bit desperate to look, like to fit in, like they see these people like hanging out going to clubs, having drinks together, wearing like makeup which

you can't even see their real face from it, erm I feel like that might make, like 'oh that's fitting in, I want to look like them, and I can't wait until I'm older so I can look like them and I will look like them'”

As highlighted in the literature review Chapter, evidence has repeatedly supported the idea that children place a high level of importance on fitting in with their peers. However, this has almost always been conceptualised in the traditional sense in terms of the physical environment and tangible goods and items such as clothing, footwear or electronic gadgets. Although, as these findings appear to suggest, this desire to ‘fit in’ no longer just applies in the physical realm but also in children’s virtual environments too.

4.3.3.2 Source Characteristics - Online Influencers

Indeed, in an online context, participants also discussed how the opinions and preferences expressed by social media influencers could also be persuasive. For example,

IT8P1: “Well maybe like if erm someone’s using like the same company like quite a lot of times, like if they bought Pringles [snack] and they keep on using Pringles or maybe if they have like a brand of shoes or like clothes then it could maybe like tell you a bit that it might be trying to say ‘oh this is good’ and maybe you’ll think ‘because I like this YouTube channel then I should buy the clothes’, that’s what they want you to think... Some kids might try to make their own like YouTube channel and they might try to like act it out on their channel and try to be like that, like how the YouTuber they really like is, and they feel I’m like that person and that’s good because I like that person”

IT10P3: “We go on it [YouTube] quite a lot so you want to be like someone else if like, they’re your role model”

As evidenced so far, mass popularity was generally interpreted as an indication of something’s coolness. This appeared to extend to participants’ perceptions of online content creators and social media influencers, where the ‘coolest’ YouTubers were the ones with a large online following and high numbers of views on their YouTube video content.

Influencers who were perceived as ‘cool’ were also perceived as being more genuine. Several participants explained how consistency in terms of the topic or subject matter of an influencer’s content was an important indicator of their authenticity too. For example, this participant was discussing recommendations for Crystals on TikTok:

IT12P1: “Because the cooler people are more genuine, well I feel like the people that erm are normally more into crystals, like if somebody random just suddenly says ‘oh

this crystal's really good' and they've had no interest in crystals in the past then that's a bit suss... [suspicious]"

This was interesting because it appeared to indicate an element of relationship building between an influencer and their audience. As this participant explains, consistency in subject matter (an influencer who is known to be *"into crystals"* as opposed to *"somebody random"*) could influence the way a recommendation is interpreted.

In addition to information-seeking, entertainment appeared to be the main reason for watching influencers' content online. Many participants explained how they watched certain videos simply because they were fun or *"funny"*. For example,

IT8P1: "So it's like different food challenges and it's also quite funny because it's doing like 'how to sneak food into school' and stuff and it's like just something that you watch, it's not anything else and there's challenges, other things that you can just watch, but the challenges you can try out and then there's TikTok hacks which you can try out"

Gratification was also a key motivation for consuming content. For example, "Satisfying" ASMR videos were considered to be an addictive form of entertainment amongst participants.

SS: So does anyone want to be an ASMR YouTuber when they grow up?

"Yeah, I want to eat stuff"

SS: Is it just eating though or is it - has anyone seen any other ASMR videos?

[laughs]

"Awwwww wax melts"

"It's like satisfying!"

SS: Why do you guys like satisfying videos, what is it about them?

"I don't know It's just amazing"

SS: Why?

"It's just your eyes are glued to it"

[laughter]

“It’s addictive!”

SS: OK you say they’re addictive and you agree they’re addictive? Would everyone kind of say they’re addictive?

[all talk at once]

In contrast, there were less popular elements of influencer videos. Such as the shared idea that online content can sometimes be orchestrated just to encourage views and additional sponsorship, which was discussed by participants. For example, ‘unboxing’ videos on YouTube were criticised by participants for making people “*want the thing that [the YouTuber] is unboxing*” (IT5P2).

IT6P1: “I don’t like them because they make you jealous and they only do it for sponsors”

IT6P2: “Um... yeah, like (.) I like that they [the YouTuber] enjoy opening the toys but I don’t like that sometimes they just do it for a vid [video]”

Other participants disliked the way that influencers communicated with their audience, which was often perceived as annoying, over-exaggerated or over-enthusiastic. For example the YouTuber ‘Ryan’, creator of *Ryan’s World of Toys*,

IT3P2: Because he’s like, if you’re a kid, if you got given a present you wouldn’t be like [puts on a different voice to mimic Ryan] ‘Oh I wonder what this is...? maybe it’s a dinosaur!’ [laughs] and then you open it and it’s like ‘look here it’s a piece of string, what are we going to do next?’ [laughs]”

Participants also suggested that popular social media influencers had tendencies to brag or boast in their content. For example,

SS: Ok so just on that family you were telling me about, and this idea that there’s quite a lot of bragging, do you see that a lot on YouTube?

IT3P2: “Well, sometimes, like when they do reviews, like ‘well I’ve got for my birthday a mansion’ and they’re moving house like every couple of weeks then they’re gonna be, they’re gonna keep on, be ‘oh look yeah’, it makes them look mean, like it makes them feel better, if you brag, like that’s not really me”

IT3P1: “Like Mr Beast he sometimes brags and sometimes doesn’t, like he gives, like he has lots of friends and he’s like ‘all my friends I’ll give you loads of money’, but then he’ll give the same amount to charity so then it makes you feel like oh, so he’s not as bad as that”

These qualities tended to be perceived quite negatively and as such, many participants expressed a desire for real-life or realism rather than “*fake*” content online.

IT10P1: "It depends really, most young minds believe most things they see first time (.) I tend to think about it more logically, if I know it's fake I still watch but only for the fun, I don't really believe it"

IT10P3: "Yeah, when you watch it first time you seemed to be amazed but when you think about it, it doesn't look too realistic (.) the thing I don't like is that people will go to the lengths of faking stuff just to get views...half of the time the video is paid [for] and it isn't their actual opinion"

4.3.3.3 Sibling and Parental Influence

Overall, participants' descriptions of what they believed was 'cool' seemed to be based on their own personal preferences, their current hobbies and interests as well as the opinions of their friends, peers and relatives. Interestingly, where participants made references to the listening to the opinions of relatives, this was always related to their siblings and/or cousins rather than their parents and caregivers whose opinions were often perceived as being the opposite to their own. In terms of their consumer behaviour, the general consensus appeared to be that siblings and cousins did have some influence on their own brand preferences (e.g. clothing) as well as their choices on games to play.

4.3.3.3.1 Parental Approval

Parents on the other hand, were often described as gatekeepers to the family purse strings, who required convincing to purchase certain products, mainly those that were considered unnecessary or unhealthy. Although, as mentioned in the first theme, parents did appear to be a source of participants' brand awareness.

4.3.3.3.2 Parent-Driven Purchases

Many participants also made references to their parents suggesting purchases or offering to buy things for their children, without being prompted first. For example, when shopping in retail environments, parents would ask for their children's approval or opinion when purchasing groceries and food items as well as provide suggestions on what to purchase in toy shops (e.g. Lego). Participants also explained how their parents would order clothing online for them and others described occasions where their parents had offered to buy them in-game currency (such as Vbucks and Robux).

4.3.4 Summary of Theme Two: Marketing's role in Children's Lifestyle and Identity Formation

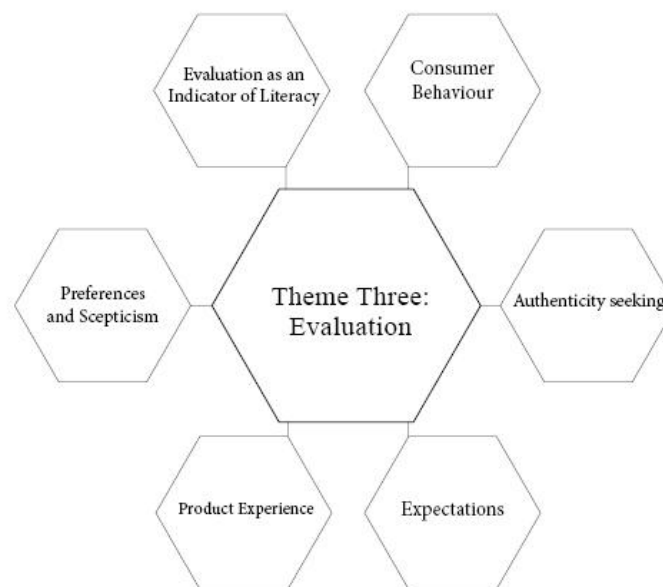
During the fieldwork, the researcher was keen to explore children's own perceptions and preferences in relation to the contemporary media environment. The reason for this was to focus more on the characteristics of marketing formats than previous research to analyse if this could add value to our understanding of advertising literacy. The findings presented in this section suggest that certain aspects of 'childhood' as it is defined in this research have actually changed very little over the last 50 years. For example, the concept of 'cool', the influence of peers and the importance of the symbolic nature of goods. These findings confirm that peers are still a key source of influence on things that children buy and want to buy, but also suggest that this influence now manifests itself in virtual environments too in the form of other players in online games and social media content creators that children admire and relate to.

As acknowledged throughout this thesis, cognitive developmental perspectives on children's advertising literacy have been extremely useful in helping researchers establish the importance of the ability to recognise advertising as a fundamental part of the process in developing understanding. In addition, consumer socialisation research has consistently demonstrated that children's consumer behaviour is influenced by many aspects of their childhood experiences and their social networks. Whilst there has been progress in terms of placing more emphasis on integration and the ways that advertising is evolving in literacy research, there are still gaps relating to the context of children's consumption and their advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment (Lampert et al., 2021). However, the findings in this section indicate where there appears to be overlaps between entertainment and commercialisation in children's contemporary advertising. In an oversaturated marketing environment, there appears to be a demand for authenticity in marketing, with over-the-top, unrealistic or "fake" communications considerably less popular with children than ones that appear to be more genuine. This desire for authenticity could be a key factor in terms of persuasion and the appeal of marketing material and content. By exploring the context of children's consumption, it could be possible to understand why advertising can still be persuasive even when it is recognisable and reveal insights that could help improve the way that digital formats are regulated.

Overall, these findings complement those already presented in Theme 1 and those presented in Theme 3 in the next section of this Chapter (Section 4.4) by providing unique insights into the context of children’s consumption from their own perspectives, a factor that has often been overlooked in previous advertising literacy research.

4.4 Theme Three - Children’s Evaluation of Advertising

Figure 4.8 Key Findings from Theme Three



(Source: Author’s own work).

4.4.1. Introduction to Theme Three

As introduced at the beginning of this Chapter, the third theme that emerged during data analysis; *Children’s evaluation of advertising*, relates to the questions surrounding children’s advertising literacy and how they interpret and understand the commercialised information that they come into contact with on a daily basis. Essentially, the foundations of this theme are based on findings that relate specifically to the third research question in this thesis, which is; RQ3: *How is children’s advertising literacy enacted in practice?*

This theme relates to the central tenet of marketing, which is an exchange of value. Overall, this theme brings together insights from the data into how children make different judgments about the marketing content that they are exposed to, and how they use their judgement in conjunction with their own consumer preferences and experiences to navigate the marketplace as consumers.

4.4.2 Children's Consumer Behaviour

One of the most interesting findings from this research was the revelation that children actually engage in quite sophisticated decision processes when it comes to interpreting marketing information and making purchases. One of the key aspects of this related to the importance of being able to ascertain value for money when making a purchase, a point which was expressed by many participants. For example, when discussing the types of things that they typically bought with their own money, many participants made references to engaging in self-questioning behaviours before making a purchase, such as: *Will I use it? Do I really need it? Am I wasting my money?* and ultimately, *Is it worth it?* For example,

W3P10: Ok so first I'll look at the price and then do I really need it? and then oh is this going to be useful? Am I just going to use it once and then never use it again? and when I'm sure that I want to buy something I'll look at how much I have and even if I have enough I'm going to try and think of some points to tell my parents that it could affect me in good ways so that they could pay for it [laughs] but then eventually if they're like [pretends to shout angrily] 'no you have enough just buy it' then I'll buy it"

W3P11: "So I consider the price, I also consider what it is and I also consider if it's worth it"

W3P2: "Erm, like do I have enough money for that? And will I have enough money to save because I like to save my money, but I don't want my parents to buy it for me because then I'll feel bad, so I don't want to buy something too expensive, so I try to keep it at a low price, unless it's a special occasion like my sister's birthday, I used quite a lot of money because we're siblings and they do it for me (.) so you do it back"

As is emphasised by the participants quoted here, the price of the advertised item appeared to be one of the essential factors for consideration in this context. These discussions first occurred during the creative workshops, and as such the researcher was keen to explore this further during the interviews to gain insight into other elements that could be potentially significant in this process.

During repeated analysis of the interview data alongside the workshop data, it appeared that this was not just a specific thought-process only applied by participants when considering how to spend their own money, but also when they were given the opportunity to buy goods and products with their parents' or other relatives' money. For example:

IT1P2: "Usually when I go to get Lego or something I usually, like (.) when I go the Lego place now I see something that I could buy but I have so much money that I don't want to like (.) spend it so (.) my parents even say 'you can get this' and I'm just like 'no I don't want to get it because I want to save my money' even if they say they might give me an extra few pounds to spend and get it I still say no."

Furthermore, as highlighted earlier in Section 4.2.2.2, the retail price of the item appeared to be a key part of this decision-making process. The two quotations below illustrate the consideration of price - first in relation to the participant's shopping budget and second in relation to how useful the product might actually be, even if it was considered to be a 'cool' thing to have. For example:

IT12P1: "I do think about if it's expensive (.) but like if it's a just a tiny bit expensive like if my budget's 20 and it's like 23 quid, then I don't think it's too expensive but if it's like 50 quid then I will definitely not buy it because I'm not wasting my money on that because that is a waste of money (.) like it's over twice as much as I wanted to spend, like over what I thought it would be"

IT5P1 "I was like it's either too expensive or you will only use it once or it's probably a scam, like sometimes if something makes me feel cool but it's a bit useless (.) I'll tell myself not to buy it"

In addition to considering the price of an item, participants also made references to 'shopping around', saving their money and engaging in comparison behaviours before committing to a purchase. For example,

IT1P1: "I'll have a look and see if I'd really like it and then maybe watch another video to see if it's actually like that or to see if I'm spending my money on a thing that I'm never going to use"

IT2P2: "I went to the shops the other day, we didn't really go into like toy shops because I don't really play with toys, like snack shops, erm we went in like clothing shops and I didn't really see any shops that I wanted to go in to like spend my money so I'll probably just go back to games but I'll still save some money"

IT8P1: "Erm (.) well I've always been looking at some shoes [online], well (.) wanting to buy and there's two different ones and because some of mine are quite old and don't fit me anymore I'm like 'shall I buy these or these?' and I was really thinking 'I'm just not going to get any' (.) I'm just going to go to a shop and see what I like there... I wanted to see what they actually look like"

Here this participant describes an occasion of using the Internet to research different shoe brands, yet emphasises the importance of being able to physically see what the shoes “*actually look like*” in the “*shop*” compared to the way they are presented online. During the same interview (IT8) in response to the conversation, the second participant explained how they have also considered the environmental impact of plastic toys such as ‘pop-its’ as well as the potential longevity of the things that they consider buying:

IT8P2: “I have, like, some things that I have and this is the main one because I really wanted a pop-it or fiddle toy but they're like plastic and I was thinking about the environment and I was like ‘no I shouldn't do that’, and I was looking at buying some new clip-on earrings but I have loads of them and I was thinking ‘I'm not going to really use them because I have to go to school and I can't wear them there it's only like the weekends so I wont use them that much and also I really wanted like (.) a two wheeler scooter but I was thinking ‘I already have a scooter at home that I could use’ but I really wanted one that was up to [appropriate for] my [skill] level because I can do my one like quite easily and I was thinking ‘I should use my one first and then grow out of it’”.

It was particularly intriguing to analyse the participants’ diverse descriptions of their pre-purchase decision making processes and start to build a picture of an underlying practice of quite sophisticated, reflective and critical thinking. This is a novel finding, as very few studies, with the exception of Nairn, Griffin and Wicks (2008) explore this element of children’s consumer behaviour.

4.4.3 Authenticity Seeking

Similar to the findings highlighted in Theme Two, regarding participants’ preferences for “genuine” as opposed to “fake” people and content online, participants also expressed preferences for authenticity in the ways that products and goods are portrayed in advertising. Authenticity in this context is related to several factors, not just to the presentation of video games and apps but also to commercialised representations of other child-targeted products such as food and toys. For example,

W3P1: “I saw this video and it was about this tiny robot which would be really cool and I got it for Christmas and it turned out to be nothing like it was on the video, and I was sad.”

Many participants appeared to share this perception that quite often, video games and toys in particular failed to live up to the marketing hype. Further analysis indicated that there could be several reasons why participants held this view. One reason that was discussed frequently by participants was the perception that advertising is inherently unrealistic and typically makes things look better than they actually are in reality. This seemed to be particularly significant in relation to children’s perceptions of gaming-related advertisements, insofar as

many participants felt that they had been hoodwinked by misleading or deceptive advertisements. For example,

W3P7: "Usually adverts aren't like (.) they make the ad [advertisement] look better than the game is actually"

SS: "That's interesting, does everyone else kind of agree with that? Do you think that adverts make things look better?"

[multiple participants agree]

This apparent shared perception that unrealistic experiences are frequently portrayed in gaming advertisements appeared to be related to an underlying preference for authenticity in advertising. Interestingly, participants suggested that real-life portrayals in advertising could make it seem more "fun". For example:

W3P4: "also you need to show what it [the product] is actually, because sometimes (.) they just like, tell you what it is but not actually show you it, they need to tell you what it is but they need to show you it as well. And it needs to be fun, it can't just be boring like 'this is an app you need to download it', like it has to be fun."

W3P5: "Erm like to make it fun I like seeing people play it, because if you see people play it it's more like the real version but if it's for an app, then it's probably not the real version and that's like not, not real"

As explained in the previous methodology Chapter, the code "actually" was introduced to the dataset by the researcher during the third cycle of data coding and analysis. At first glance, the analytical value of this code may not be immediately apparent, however it allowed the researcher to code and subsequently explore multiple sections of the data set where the importance of realism had been mentioned and emphasised by participants. Overall, findings indicate that portrayals of products, games and toys in real-life settings are appealing to children aged 9 - 11 years. By taking this approach, it began to emerge that in addition to being an appealing characteristic in terms of entertainment value, ascertaining accuracy and truth in advertisements through real life elements (such as being able to experience the game through the advertisement itself) is a priority for children. It helps them to interpret the content that they are consuming and helps them to evaluate what an advertised item is likely to be in reality like and therefore if it is worth considering.

W3P2: "Erm I like it when games, when the adverts for the games are interactive, so you know what you're going to do erm you have to do everything in the game in the advert and then you're like oh that was quite fun and then you'll download it and you know what you're getting"

4.4.4 Children's Expectations of Online Advertising

Despite this, further analysis revealed that quite often, children's expectations of what a video game would actually be like to play (based on the advertised experience) were not met.

For example, one participant described how an advertisement for the game 'Bubble Tomb Blast' was misleading, as it appeared to suggest that certain features of the game designed to make the levels easier to complete (e.g. game boosters) would be available to players from the very first level when actually, players would have to complete many levels of the game to access the same features shown in the advertisement.

W3P9: "I've literally seen this in mobile game ads [advertisements], like (.) they have erm, a mobile game and they make it look so easy, they make it look like they've done it so many times, like in Bubble Tomb Blast, they make it look so easy to get the colours and get two chocolate balls together, pop the balls maybe like shoot all the lines in colour to make it look really easy and then you find out you've gotta go through the entire thing, which is very boring"

Another participant described feeling a similar sense of frustration with the video game *Fortnite*, where certain elements of the game i.e. the "skins and wraps" (which allow players to customise the appearance of their avatar and the look of the game) were promoted in advertisements without providing adequate information relating to the actual cost of these items.

IT1P1: "And then another thing I've noticed is like (.) luckily Fortnite is free because I think they [the developers] want you to buy all like the skins and wraps but actually when you start looking at all of it, and buying everything, it actually makes it look like it costs zero but when you get everything it could cost £100s or £200s"

As discovered during the content analysis work, this business model is typical of free-to-download video and mobile games such as *Fortnite*, which were extremely popular with the children in this research. The games are free of charge at the point of purchase, but then users are usually bombarded with in-game prompts to purchase additional items (add-ons) such as the 'skins' or 'wraps' for the game's characters and the players' avatars as described by the participant here. Quite often, these 'skins' and 'wraps' feature logos or trademarks from third-party brands. Other customisable game elements may also feature imagery, colour schemes or recognisable graphics from other popular children's characters as a form of cross promotion of other products, merchandise, movies and television shows.

These ‘add-ons’ are designed to enhance the user’s gameplay experience and are frequently promoted within the game in such a way that they are almost impossible to avoid. As evidenced above, users might feel that they have to make additional purchases to enjoy the game fully. Furthermore, it appears that there is also an element of competition with the way that additional features or acquisition of ‘add ons’ are promoted to children within these games, in the sense that some are arguably more valuable and therefore more appealing to players than others. This is particularly the case with many of the mini-games available within the *Roblox* app. This concept is introduced in the next Chapter as ‘a hierarchy or value’ and an explanation of the theoretical basis for this concept and how it ultimately creates a hierarchy of appeal in children’s content is presented in the following Chapter along with its potential implications.

4.4.5 The Important of Product Experience

Analysis also indicated that another way in which children judge the value of promoted goods and products is by drawing on their existing knowledge and prior experience with other, similar products. This suggests that having some prior experience of the product is a significant factor when it comes to deciding whether something is worth buying.

Upon further analysis, this finding was strengthened by data, which indicates that it is not just children’s own personal experience that plays a role in this process, but that the experiences of friends and peers can be taken into consideration too. In other words, children may perceive other children who are members of their social networks and who they have a relationship with in real life as valuable sources of information too. As suggested earlier in Theme Two, children’s peers play an important role in the formulation and cementation of their identity and also that this extends to their consumer behaviour too. However, in the case of products at the centre of popular ‘crazes’ or ‘trends’, children may not have had the access to that particular item before. Therefore, they look to their peers first and foremost for what they believe will be genuine recommendations and reviews and then to social media influencers that they feel they can trust.

4.4.6 Children’s Advertising Preferences and Scepticism

Overall, the children who participated in this research seemed to be more enthusiastic during discussions when they were describing advertisements that they strongly disliked or certain unpopular aspects of advertising as a practice compared to advertisements that they did like.

However, where the subject of the advertisement related to the product they were interested in they found these less irritating. For example,

W3P5: Sometimes on my like electric [electronic] device (.) sometimes they'll like advertise on the game, like when you're starting it might have a bit where you can quickly look at adverts for the game

W3P8: "I kind of like, I pay attention to them, just a bit, because if they have an app that's actually quite interesting and it's an app that I might need I would download it because it might be an app that I could use in the future."

Generally, participants expressed a level of scepticism towards overly positive sentiments within advertisements. As suggested in Theme Two, over enthusiastic or exaggerated claims in online content were perceived quite negatively by children. However, participants seemed to accept that this was part of the format and would still choose to watch influencers' videos despite this.

Participants also described their awareness of online marketing "scams" based on their own experience as well as the experiences of their friends.

W2P2: "I remember, it wasn't a trend it was more of a marketing scam but its, it was like, there was this game that um, for a month it would let you have a VIP member[ship] for free but then it would be, it was either 5 pounds a week to have the VIP member (.) membership and it was just a massive scam, like I didn't buy it (.) it was a video that I watched on it and it said roughly 99 per cent of the people were kids doing it and only 1 per cent of the kids actually wanted to buy it and it didn't require you to enter any bank details or email address, you just had to press a button and 'VIP' and it was targeting kids"

IT4P1: "One of our friends said 'there's this really good game that you could get it's called Paladins, erm and my brother really likes it and I said 'I don't want to get it though', but when my brother got it erm on it, it showed that you get all the characters on the top line but you only got a few, so I said to myself 'I don't want to get it because it could be fake' also on advertisements it said 'get this game' and it said 'buy one get one free' but that's a lie, it said get '300,000 gold and a pet' and when I got onto it, it said you had to pay £3.99 to get the game and I was thinking to myself, 'if it doesn't give it me then that's a scam so then there's no point of getting the game'"

4.4.7 Evaluation as an Indicator of Literacy

Despite evidencing awareness of the different marketing strategies used by companies across different channels, it was apparent that most children have low levels of awareness of embedded marketing formats where the commercial agenda of content was much harder to

discern. Regardless of this, participants appeared to have good faith in their own advertising literacy skills and their perceived abilities to recognise when they were exposed to an attempt that was trying to sell them something or persuade them to take action. It became clear that participants did not think it was difficult to distinguish what was advertising online and what was genuine.

IT5P3: "If I saw something on social media, I would know it would be persuading me to buy something because there would be pictures of people wearing clothes that says come and buy this dress I made"

IT5P2: "If it's persuading something to me it will have the brand somewhere on screen and I don't think it's hard to tell (.) they [advertisers] list the good features of an expensive item and I don't think it's hard to tell if someone's advertising (.) they'll say it's good, or buy this now or it won't say anything. If it was advertising it would be trying to persuade you to buy stuff now"

IT2P2: "It could be like, say 'get this now, at the shops for some price, get a deal for it'"

IT6P1: "They always say how good the thing is"

IT11P2: "It's not really hard to tell because they always exaggerate it and it's kind of obvious"

IT11P1: "I would be able to see and identify if it said 'get this or get that'"

However, when asked specifically about social media content during the interviews, participants admitted that they might struggle to determine a genuine endorsement for a product or brand from a commercially motivated one. For example,

IT10P1: "I think it would be hard to tell as you have a trust with them [the influencer] because you don't realise if you need it or not"

IT3P2: I think it's hard to tell because when you watch it, let's say like they're doing a makeup tutorial, and they're like this is really good for you, then that they think I think they're just trying to maybe tell you 'well this is quite good', it depends if you like it, they can't say this, they can't just make a product, bring it out and be like 'none of them are good', they [the viewers] like, might be watching it to learn what to do or how to do it [make-up style]"

Interestingly, this participant makes reference to a potential information-seeking motivation for watching a make-up tutorial online. During analysis, it emerged that there were several aspects mentioned by this participant that were also echoed by other interviewees. For example, having a preference for the featured product or brand ("*it depends if you like it*") as

well as an awareness of the positive tone of commercial messages (“they can’t just... be like ‘none of them are good’”).

What was particularly interesting during the analysis was that children appeared to use various characteristics of the content itself to decode its underlying commercial agenda. For example, participants discussed the characteristics of online advertising messages such as a direct call to action (i.e. to purchase something) and how they perceived the emphasis on the positive aspects of the featured product or item as being a clue that content might be commercially motivated.

IT6P1: “I would know because they would immediately change the topic like if someone was doing a gaming video, they would do an advert for merch [merchandise] on their website”

4.4.7.1 Reduced Functionality (As a Consequence of Advertising)

Throughout the fieldwork, participants also demonstrated an awareness of how advertising may reduce the functionality of the content they are consuming in some way. As was evidenced in the discussions on television advertising and how it typically interrupts the television programme they are watching (in Theme One), many participants applied this logic/made similar references to the way that online or in-app advertisements interrupt gameplay. During analysis, it appeared that the participants’ familiarity with television advertising could serve as a transferable skill to decode intent in other formats where there was a lack of clear disclosure but a break in content.

4.4.8 Summary of Theme Three: Children’s Evaluation of Advertising

The findings presented in this theme suggest that children are involved in exchanges of value in almost every aspect of their lives. In real life, they negotiate with their parents and family members and with their friends and peers. Online, they are making deals and trading with others in online games, selecting branded clothing for their avatars and channelling their favourite brands and products to each other through their own content. For children, entertainment is a key motivation for consuming online content. In previous years, advertising or marketing was clearly demarcated from entertainment content, however, increased integration combined with increased exposure (as a result of increasingly digital lifestyles) could have potentially increased children’s dispositional literacy when it comes to more obvious or recognisable forms of advertising. Participants demonstrated quite a sophisticated understanding of persuasion knowledge, with clear understanding of the

differences between persuasive intent and selling intent. However, participants were generally less critical of integrated formats, which appeared to be as a result of their attention being elsewhere and the entertainment value of these formats.

These findings support previous research such as van Reijmersdal et al., (2016) by suggesting that children do not tend to recognise embedded advertising to still be susceptible to product-targeted online advertising. This could be because these advertisements are perceived as more relevant but because they positively influence children's preference for a particular advertisement and are not recognised as commercially motivated.

It is true that the marketplace has become saturated with commercial content and advertising is everywhere, meaning that children are exposed to more advertising than ever before, yet these findings indicate that they are not entirely incapable of coping with it, even if they do not immediately recognise it. These findings indicate that there may be certain characteristics associated with commercialised content itself that may function in a similar way to disclosure cues to help children make judgements about the content they are consuming. Essentially, these findings suggest that there is value in moving away from theories of literacy that emphasise the link between knowing and recognising what advertising is (i.e. conceptual knowledge of advertising) and not wanting to buy something simply because of that. These findings suggest that when it comes to children's consumption there are several important factors that may influence their interpretation of advertising. These relate to their knowledge about the marketplace, their knowledge of contemporary techniques and their considerations of what they consider to be value for money, what might be too good to be true and whether that is an exchange of value that they are willing to make. This notion is explored in more depth in the following Chapter.

4.5 Findings Chapter - Summary

Overall, the findings from this PhD research indicate that children do have a relatively strong awareness of many different forms of marketing communications, even though they typically perceive these as different forms of 'advertising'. This suggests that 'advertising' is a familiar term in children's vocabulary. Additionally, it indicates that children have a tendency to associate the term 'advertising' with all elements of the marketing mix, not just those related to the promotional or communicative aspects but also in terms of product, place and price.

When considered as a whole, these findings indicate awareness and recognition (i.e. cognitive dimensions of advertising literacy), perceptions and scepticism (i.e. attitudinal dimensions) and moral judgements towards the general practice and appropriateness of advertising. As noted earlier in Section 2.2.2.6, much of the previous research on the moral dimensions of advertising literacy relates to the ability to judge the appropriateness of advertising (De Jans et al., 2018; van Dam and van Reijmersdal 2019). Previous authors have shown that children are capable of making a judgement as to whether an advertisement is “good or bad” but this typically relates to their attitudes towards advertising in general rather than an evaluation of the appropriateness and fairness of advertising tactics (Loose et al., 2023, p86). However, these findings also indicate that moral dimensions of advertising literacy should also take into consideration content evaluations pertaining to the perceived value of the advertised exchange. Be it value for money, hedonic and or usage value of the advertised product or service.

These findings show that children associate the term ‘advertising’ with many aspects of the modern marketplace, which raises a question regarding the most effective ways to explore children’s understanding of advertising in the contemporary media environment. If the researcher had chosen to give definitions about the nature of contemporary advertising including sponsorship or sales promotions, or ask children about them specifically, then it is likely that this would have influenced their discussions and the data would not have been as rich. Therefore, by refraining from imposing a structure or perspective and by adopting participants' own language and terms, this exploratory research provides authentic insights into children’s advertising literacy in their own words. As argued throughout this thesis so far, incorporating a sociological perspective towards children’s advertising literacy in this PhD research allows for a deeper exploration of the environment within which consumption takes place. Further justification for shifting the research focus from the individual child to the environment is reiterated and substantiated in the following Discussion Chapter (Section 5.2).

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Introduction to the Chapter

This Chapter aims to articulate the overall value of this PhD study by presenting its theoretical and methodological contributions. As such, it is structured into two parts. The first part of the discussion continues the focus of the previous Chapter (Chapter 4), with a deeper analysis of the relevance and significance of this study’s findings in terms of the advancement of children’s advertising literacy theory. It begins by highlighting key insights from the three overarching themes identified in the data: 1) *Omnipresence*, 2) *Lifestyle* and 3) *Evaluation* (as introduced in Sections 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 in Chapter 4). These insights are summarised for ease of reference for the reader in Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1 Key Research Findings

Finding	Related Theme
Evidence of associations between the explicit communication of commercial intent and the perceived relevance of the content	Theme One: Omnipresence
Evidence of a clear preference amongst children for authentic, genuine and non-sponsored content	Theme One: Omnipresence
Non-sponsored content viewed as entertainment by children	Theme One: Omnipresence
Advertisements that are perceived as “real” (i.e. more obvious and recognisable) are more believable	Theme One: Omnipresence
Children have a high awareness but low tolerance for “advertising”	Theme One: Omnipresence
The perceived social elements of products and brands are an important part of perceived value	Theme Two: Lifestyle
The symbolic aspects of an item and its perceived social associations influence children's perceptions of the product, the advertisement, the brand and the source of the communication	Theme Two: Lifestyle
Children’s pre-purchase decisions are based on their existing knowledge of the marketplace and prior experience with the advertised commodity	Theme Two: Lifestyle
Children have a strong desire to ‘fit in’ with their friends and peers in both real and virtual environments	Theme Two: Lifestyle
Children appear to be more receptive to messages that are not obviously commercially motivated	Theme Three: Evaluation

Evidence of children’s sophisticated pre-purchase decision making process	Theme Three: Evaluation
Evidence that children use content characteristics to decode underlying commercial agendas, e.g. overly positive messages = clue that content might be commercially motivated	Theme Three: Evaluation

(Source: Author’s own work).

Section 5.2 situates this PhD research by discussing its key findings (shown in Table 5.1) within the context of the extant literature, acknowledging where it supports and substantiates the conclusions of previous studies and where it challenges and contradicts existing assumptions in advertising literacy research.

This section also considers how useful these findings are in answering the three research questions posed in this PhD thesis (reproduced below for ease of reference).

Research Questions

- RQ1: *What are children’s perceptions of contemporary advertising formats?*
- RQ2: *What can a sociological perspective on consumption reveal about the nature of children’s advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment?*
- RQ3: *How is children’s advertising literacy enacted in practice?*

Section 5.3 builds on this discussion by drawing attention to the theoretical contributions of this PhD study. It focuses on the identification of novel insights, which are considered in terms of the potential enhancement of existing advertising literacy knowledge. This section discusses the researcher’s analytical interpretations of the data in more depth, reflecting the exploratory nature of this study and its underlying philosophical and epistemological perspective. It explains how these findings shaped the evolution of the initial conceptual framework (see Figure 2.5 in Chapter 2), which led to the development of The Layers of Literacy framework (introduced as Figure 5.1 in Section 5.3).

In the second part of this Chapter, Section 5.4 shifts the discussion onto the methodological contributions of this thesis and explains how these stem from the interdisciplinary approach and innovative research design adopted in this PhD study (as shown in Figure 3.1, Chapter 3). This section argues the case for more qualitative studies on children's advertising literacy, by emphasising the benefits of creative methods that recognise children's unique view of the world and stimulate their imaginations, and how these can generate more authentic, insightful data (Vaart et al., 2018). This argument is returned to in Section 6.5 in the following Chapter (Conclusions), where further practical guidance is presented in the interest of researchers from all disciplines who may be considering using creative, participatory approaches in future research projects involving children and young people.

5.2 Discussion of Key Findings and Answering the Research Questions

In agreement with the extant literature, the findings of this PhD research appear to support the notion that marketing, in all its multifarious forms, continues to infiltrate and invade children's everyday lives (Kline, 1993; Linn, 2004; Cook, 2004; Schor, 2005; Kapur, 2005; Sparrman et al., 2012; Jaakkola, 2019). Recent research suggests that the intensity of contemporary advertising shows no signs of decreasing in the near future (Lampert et al., 2021), as marketing practitioners continue to progressively expand and enhance the mechanisms through which they can connect with young consumers and promote their brands, products and services to them (Freeman and Shapiro, 2014; van Reijmersdal et al., 2017; Zarouali et al., 2018; Nelson, 2019; Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2023).

5.2.1. Theme One: The Omnipresence of Omnichannel Advertising

As mentioned at the very beginning of this thesis in Section 1.1, concerns that commercialisation will eventually infiltrate every part of children's lives have remained an area of academic interest for the last 60 years. It was a frequent topic of discussion amongst participants, despite the fact that the researcher did not ask any specific questions that directly addressed this issue at any point during the fieldwork. The topic was raised by the participants themselves, appearing to emerge organically during their conversations. Nevertheless, it was identified as a significant area of interest during the initial coding of the data, where it became apparent that there were multiple manifestations relating to the assumption that 'advertising is everywhere', which was frequently indicated across the entire dataset from both phases of the fieldwork. Participants expressed a belief that the majority of children in the UK, including themselves, are exposed to an excessive amount of 'advertisements' on a daily basis, culminating in the widespread acceptance that advertising is practically unavoidable in today's society. It is omnipresent.

The majority of participants also demonstrated a high level of general advertising awareness (as noted in Section 4.2), which was evidenced by an obvious familiarity with commercialised content and the ways in which it can differ from other media formats, such as entertainment. These findings help to explain this awareness, by indicating that it could stem from children's propensity to associate the term 'advertising' with all the different aspects of the marketing communications mix, where the term is used to define all communications formats including those that are not strictly defined as 'advertising' *per se*, such as sponsorship, sales promotions and point of sale displays (as noted in Section 4.2.2).

It is interesting to note that participants frequently described advertising in terms of its typical features, such as the dominance of a particular brand, product or service and the presence of certain characteristics (outlined in table 2.8) such as positive messages and/or an obvious ‘call to action’. From a theoretical perspective, these associations are in line with the generally accepted ‘consumer view’ of advertising, where “all commercial messages” are considered to be a form of advertising regardless of the way the message is delivered (Malmelin, 2010, p132). As a result, it is unsurprising that ‘advertising’ itself seems to have become a familiar term in children’s vocabulary. On this point however, it is worth acknowledging that despite this PhD research’s original focus on the importance of distinguishing advertising from marketing in terms of literacy theory, in light of these findings, it is acceptable to propose that in reality, there may not be much additional theoretical value to be gained from operationalising ‘advertising literacy’ as a separate or distinct concept from ‘marketing literacy’ in future research studies with children if they themselves essentially view the practice of marketing and advertising as one and the same. This provides further justification for defining the concept of advertising as “All forms of commercially-motivated communication that intend to promote brands, products and services to a target audience” (as introduced in Section 2.3.1)

As indicated previously in Section 4.2.5, the children who participated in this research appeared to have a solid grasp of the purpose of advertising and why it exists in the modern world. From a theoretical perspective, this is encouraging because it strongly reflects the cognitive dimensions of advertising literacy, evidenced by the ability to identify both selling and persuasive intent of an advertisement. Further analysis revealed that conceptual knowledge of advertising, demonstrated by an awareness of how ‘advertising’ works is based almost exclusively on children’s self-reported familiarity with the more conspicuous and established tactics of the marketing communications mix, such as television advertising. As noted in Sections 1.2.4 and 2.2.2.4, persuasion is typically explicit in traditional advertising formats (An, Jin and Park, 2014; Hackley and Hackley, 2022). Nevertheless, participants also demonstrated a high level of awareness and understanding of certain implicit advertising tactics, such as the ‘pre-roll’ and ‘mid-roll’ advertisements that they are regularly exposed to when watching video content on YouTube. One plausible explanation for this finding is that it is simply a consequence of the general increase in children’s use of digital and social media

platforms, which has inevitably led to an increase in the amount of commercialised content that they are exposed to.

In one respect, these findings align with previous research that suggests that many children regularly access media content online and that this is becoming increasingly commercialised (De Vierman et al., 2019; Herrewijn et al., 2021). This includes the content on video-sharing platforms such as YouTube (Boerman and van Reijmersdal, 2020; Vanwesenbeeck, Hudders and Ponnet, 2020; Rasmussen et al., 2022) and TikTok, as well as other social media applications. In terms of children's awareness of advertising on YouTube, one explanation for this could be that there are shared characteristics between the format of the advertisements that are shown on YouTube and those that are shown on television (Stokel-Walker, 2019). Indeed, similarities exist between the advertising on the two channels because it tends to share similar underlying objectives (Weibel et al., 2019).

In support of this explanation, previous research has shown that children are aware of the fact that advertisements typically interrupt other forms of media, for example the entertainment programmes broadcast on television (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Lawlor and Prothero, 2008). This thesis contends that this awareness has transferred to the online environment, based on the evidence outlined in Section 4.2.4, which indicates that children understand that it is common practice for advertisements to punctuate the videos they watch online and that advertisements frequently 'pop-up' within free-to-download mobile games and applications.

Evidence suggests that advertising's blatant interruption to media content is likely to be perceived as annoying and intrusive (Campbell, Mattison-Thompson, Grimm and Robson, 2017). These findings appear to confirm this by indicating that the temporary reduction in functionality caused by advertising might reinforce negative attitudes towards advertising in general but only in terms of explicit advertising formats (see Section 4.2.6). It is interesting to note that these findings also suggest that a reduction in functionality may indicate the presence of an advertisement in the absence of any other recognisable features, such as a disclosure cue.

As noted in Section 4.4.7.1, participants described how they often associate the presence of 'advertising' with a reduction in the functionality of the media they consume, whether they are streaming an online video, using a free-to-download mobile application or watching

television. In terms of advertising literacy theory, it suggests that there could be additional discernible indications of commercial agenda within online content beyond the explicit communication and subsequent recognition of an advertisement's selling and/or persuasive intent, which are the two main elements that are included in both historical and contemporary conceptualisations of advertising literacy (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Rozendaal et al., 2011; Zarouali, 2019). As indicated in Theme One (Section 4.2), this knowledge appears to stem from children's general awareness that they are likely to encounter some form of advertising across different media channels regularly throughout their everyday lives so they may actually expect it.

Indeed, it was evident that the children in this research were quite adept at recognising when they were being advertised to and could identify explicit persuasive attempts when they encounter them in the media. Generally speaking, children seem to be very familiar with the generic formats of advertisements and the ways in which they typically appear across different channels, both offline and online. However, what is interesting in these findings is the indication that children's assessment and recognition of 'commercial' intent (encompassing both selling and persuasive intent) may also be influenced by other less obvious characteristics of the content.

In contrast to previous advertising literacy research, these findings show that certain characteristics that may help children to decode, or evaluate the underlying commercial agenda of marketing material and content, even in the absence of any explicit communication of commercial intent that is thought to trigger advertising recognition (Young, 1990; Livingstone and Helsper, 2006).

Perhaps if this PhD had opted for a deductive approach or a quantitative design, these insights might not have emerged. However, by following a qualitative methodology the researcher was able to explore children's own perspective perceptions of different characteristics of commercialised content, analyse how these can influence children's interpretations of both explicit and implicit advertising formats.

In terms of answering the first question: *RQ1: What are children's perceptions of contemporary advertising formats?*, it was explained in Sections 4.2.2 and 4.2.6 in Chapter 4 that children's perceptions of advertising are dynamic and fluid, much like the nature of the

contemporary media environment itself. Children's perceptions of advertising are subjective and unpredictable. For example, when it comes to children's perceptions of commercially-motivated messages, it was clear that overly positive sentiments raise children's suspicions (Section 4.4.6.). There was a shared perception amongst participants that advertisements typically make things 'look better' than they actually are in reality. Whilst prior research has recognised scepticism as an important attitudinal dimension of advertising literacy (Hudders et al., 2017; Sweeney et al., 2021), these findings offer deeper insights into children's perceptions of the typical advertisement format relating to its tendency to distort reality, embellish benefits or overstate claims. Furthermore, there was evidence to suggest that when children make a judgement that a call to action or persuasive message is 'too good to be true', it may serve as an indication that the content has an underlying commercial agenda even if this is not explicitly disclosed or clearly communicated to them. In other words, even if the circumstances where media content is not necessarily recognised as an advertisement.

Returning to the literature, both the affect-transfer hypothesis and mere exposure effects theory offer some insight into why this might be the case. For example, based on the suggestions that consumers' favourable attitudes towards a brand are influenced by their attitude to the advertisement itself rather than their perceptions of the brand (MacKenzie et al., 1986; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989; Stewart et al., 2018), an affect transfer perspective could also be applied in terms of children's perceptions of the source of an advertisement and the positive effects this has on their attitudes towards a brand. This could explain why 'organic' or user-created content on social media is more successful than 'paid-for' advertising formats.

In addition, based on the clear evidence of the 'omnipresence' of commercialisation demonstrated by these findings, the theory of mere exposure effects may be useful here in two ways. First, the idea that "mere exposure to a stimulus is sufficient for [an] enhancement in attitude towards it" Zajonc (1968, p1) offers an explanation for the success of embedded advertising formats that do not rely on recognition, but that work on an affective level based on consumers' prior exposure to an advertised brand or product (Grimes, 2008).

However, in contrast to this reasoning, it is possible to speculate that mere [over]exposure may be a reason why participants describe overwhelmingly negative attitudes towards the practice of advertising in general, viewing it as an intrusive, annoying and unavoidable part of their everyday lives (4.2.6.1). Either way, these findings offer encouragement for the

consideration of one or both of these theories (or an amalgamation of the two as proposed by Grimes, 2008) in future advertising research by challenging the importance of ‘disliking of advertising’ as the defining feature in terms of what constitutes a critical attitude towards advertising.

However, a distinction must be made here between genuinely organic content (i.e. without an underlying commercial agenda), seemingly organic content (where the underlying commercial agenda is difficult to detect) and blatant ‘paid for’ content. As noted earlier in Section 2.2.2.8, previous research into how affect transfer and mere exposure mechanisms work has indicated that the effect on consumers’ attitudes cannot be neatly assigned to either end of a linear spectrum between positive and negative (Stewart et al., 2018). In practice, the influence of advertising is a much more complex concept to define (Leiss et al., 2018), which points towards the importance of understanding the way that advertising is ‘read’ by consumers, depending on their own unique motivations and abilities (Mackenzie et al., 1986; Mackenzie and Lutz, 1989).

Indeed, these findings indicate that even before they have processed the commercial message, children undertake an initial ‘reading’ of advertisements. During this process, children are quick to recognise the more typical, ‘visual’ features of advertisements. For example, they observe the colour change from red to yellow to indicate the time left on a video on YouTube (i.e. red is used for the entertainment content, and yellow is used for pre and mid-roll advertisements). Children are also well aware of textual disclosures used on social media platforms such as ‘#ad’ ‘#sponsored’ or #paidpartnership on Instagram or typographical/textual disclaimers that are featured in the caption or description of videos on YouTube. This also supports previous suggestions of the importance of heuristic cues in the reading of advertisements (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; Chaiken and Maheswaran, 1994; Chen and Chaiken, 1999; Moses and Baldwin, 2005). These ideas are expanded upon in Subsection 5.2.1.1 and the potential links between these insights and their conceptual relevance to children’s advertising literacy theory are discussed in more detail in Section 5.2.3; (Theme Three).

Interestingly, despite this awareness of the typical features of social media and YouTube advertising, it was evident that many participants were much less familiar with the nature of advertising on TikTok, which is an increasingly popular video-sharing platform among pre-

adolescent children as discussed previously (in Section 2.3.2.2). Unlike advertising on YouTube, the majority of participants could not describe an obvious formula or format of advertising as it exists on TikTok. One explanation for this could be that as an app with an age restriction of 13 years + the participants who were aged between 9 and 11 years at the time of this research were simply not using it as frequently as other social media platforms. However, several participants did explain that they were regular users of the app, a finding which actually aligns with recent industry evidence which confirms suspicions that many children under the age of 13 in the UK are accessing TikTok on a regular basis, creating accounts that are based on a false date of birth: as a way of getting around the platform's age restrictions (MediaSmart, 2023).

What is interesting about TikTok as a video-sharing platform in comparison to YouTube is that it presents a seamless, never-ending supply of content, which is tailored and personalised to individual users regardless of its entertainment or commercial purpose (Yuan, Xia and Ye, 2022). In that respect, it could be argued that advertising or commercially-motivated content on TikTok is more embedded than any of the other 'covert' contemporary advertising formats discussed in this thesis or that have been researched by marketing scholars to date. In that respect, it is not surprising that children appear to find it harder to distinguish or accurately describe advertising on TikTok than other social media platforms, which does potentially highlight an area of concern.

As discussed earlier in this thesis (Section 1.2.3) and the beginning of this Chapter, it is evident that there is a disconnect between academia and practice in marketing research. From a practice perspective, this disconnect is also evident here, where it is clear that marketers and brands are aware of the enormous potential in utilising TikTok videos as marketing tools (Grome, 2022). From a policy perspective, the UK advertising industry also recognises that children's use of TikTok is an area of interest, and has sought to address the lack of information on TikTok by producing a number of free resources aimed at secondary schools pupils aged between the ages of 13 and 17 years, which are available through the main website of the government-backed initiative; *MediaSmart* (MediaSmart, 2023). The resources aim to educate children on how to identify the various types of advertising that they might encounter on TikTok, including some of the more subtle formats.

However, from an academic perspective, despite a couple of recent papers confirming that commercialised content is now beginning to infiltrate TikTok (Bucknell-Bossen and Kottasz, 2020; Yuan, Xia and Ye, 2022), the body of academic literature on TikTok and advertising is noticeably sparse compared to scholarly research on other social media platforms. Again, this is not a criticism as such, it is most likely a reflection of the challenge that researchers face in keeping up with the pace of technological change within the media industry (Buijzen et al., 2010). In light of this, it is strongly recommended that TikTok be regarded as a particular social media platform of interest for future children's advertising literacy research in order to stay up-to-date with shifts in the media and marketing communications in the contemporary media environment, which is a suggestion that is returned to in more detail in the following Chapter (Chapter 6).

On a related note, by shifting the focus of this study from the cognitive abilities of the individual child (as is typical in advertising literacy research) to the environment within which consumption takes place, this PhD research begins to address the lack of research in this area on “format-specific characteristics” as highlighted by Hudders et al., (2017, p347). Hence, it is this specific aspect relating to the dynamic character and nature of contemporary advertising that is significant within this PhD research. By presenting these insights, this PhD research directly addresses two of the questions raised by Hudders et al., (2017) on how the typical characteristics of an advertisement may influence its interpretation by children (i.e. affective dimension) and how children evaluate advertising (i.e. moral dimension).

5.2.1.1 Children’s Understanding of Embedded Advertising

As highlighted in the literature review in Section 2.3.3 of this thesis, concerns regarding the presence of stealth marketing techniques and their impact on children have been around for decades (Jaakkola, 2019). Evidently, this has resulted in an increased focus on marketers' use of embedded techniques in recent years (De Pauw, 2018; Herrewijn et al., 2021). However, much of this research has still tended to focus on children’s conscious and critical processing of the most recognisable formats of embedded digital marketing (Buijzen et al., 2010; Rozendaal et al., 2011; De Pauw, 2018). Few researchers have explored the subtle signs and symbols that exist within material/content that does not fit neatly into current definitions of advertising and marketing, such as product placement within children’s films (Beaufort, 2019). Fewer still have actually attempted to scrutinise the *nature* of contemporary media

formats (Hudders et al., 2017) or examined the commercial aspects of the ‘metaverse’ in sufficient depth.

This is perhaps indicative of the immense difficulty that would be involved in adequately covering the entire range of media that might appeal to children within a single research study (Watkins et al., 2022). Alternatively, as it was discussed in Chapter 4, this lack of research could also be a reflection of the complex challenges involved in choosing the most appropriate way to ask children about their understanding of covert marketing formats without inadvertently providing too many suggestions, clues or information that could influence their responses. Therefore, from an academic perspective, this means that contemporary advertising researchers not only have to acknowledge the significant industry shift from the use of more easily recognisable, explicit forms of traditional advertising to the more subtle, implicit methods of commercial persuasion, (van Reijmersdal and Rozendaal, 2020), they should also attempt to scrutinise the “kinetic, fluid and relational character of advertising and brand communication under digitisation” (Hackley and Hackley, 2022, p5) in their work.

In addition, as highlighted in the literature review Chapter of this thesis (Section 2.3.5.3), these are not just issues that affect young consumers. On the contrary, an increasing body of evidence has indicated that adults also struggle to identify the commercial intent within embedded advertising formats too (Boerman and Van Reijmersdal, 2016; Wojdyski, 2016; Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, 2018; van Reijmersdal and van Dam, 2020), which further justifies the value in researching contemporary advertising formats. Indeed, despite the increasing amount of time that children are spending online (Ofcom, 2022) and as these findings have shown, their awareness of the likelihood that they will encounter some form of ‘advertising’ online, children’s understanding of embedded advertising appears to be quite poor in comparison to their understanding of traditional tactics.

In one respect, these findings are aligned with a number of prior studies that have also surmised that children still struggle to recognise online advertising (De Jans et al., 2019; De Vierman et al., 2019; Boerman and van Reijmersdal, 2020; Lampert et al., 2021) that they show low levels of awareness of the nature of covert advertising (Buijzen et al., 2010; Lawlor et al., 2016) and that they demonstrate low levels of processing of online advertisements (van Reijmersdal et al., 2017). Furthermore, these findings also support the suggestion that

children are much less likely to recognise a persuasive attempt when their attention is elsewhere (Moore and Rideout, 2007) such as when playing around with a branded product in an advergame (Mallinckrodt and Mizerki, 2007; Buijzen et al., 2010) , when engrossed in an entertaining video on YouTube (Xiao et al., 2018) or even when they are attempting to copy the “challenges” that are promoted by social media influencers in their content (Herrewijn et al., 2021, p1), which typically involve the consumption or utilisation of a specific brand or product in some way.

In theory, this lack of recognition could be attributed to the notion that children simply fail to identify that covert, embedded commercial content is a form of advertising at all, as has been suggested previously (Lawlor et al., 2016). The existing literature offers some potential explanations for this. For example, children may simply view such content as a form of entertainment (van Dam and van Reijmersdal, 2019; Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2020). Even if they realise that there is likely to be a commercial agenda underlying content that is obviously product or brand-focused, they may still give it their attention and be receptive to its message because they view it as a valuable, reliable source of information about products (Hudders et al., 2017). There was some evidence to corroborate both of these suggestions in these findings. For example, children described using the Internet to watch television programmes, videos and films, play games and connect with their friends, which appears to confirm its entertainment value. Participants also talked about how the ‘Internet’ in a broad sense was their go-to choice for searching for information on any topic because of the ease and convenience with which they could look up information.

In terms of their consumer behaviour, these findings indicate that children use the Internet to ‘shop around’ and compare prices, as well as to seek out reviews for typical child-targeted products that appeal to them, such as games, electronic devices and toys (see. 4.4.2). Returning to the point raised by Hudders et al., (2017), regarding the suggestion that embedded advertising is potentially seen as a valuable source of information by children, these findings also offer additional insight. For example, there was evidence that children’s perceptions of the source of the information could also influence their engagement with the content and their interpretations of its message, with “cool” influencers being perceived as more genuine (see 4.3.3.2).

An alternative explanation suggested by these findings could be that children's familiarity with the integration of advertising content with other forms of media online means that children may *expect* to be presented with some form of explicit advertising disclosure when they are exposed to commercialised content (see 4.2.4). In the absence of any obvious textual, visual or verbal clarification that content contains an advertisement, children may assume that endorsements delivered in this way are also more genuine and authentic, perceiving it as a more trustworthy source of information than content that is obviously "sponsored" and therefore worthy of their time and attention. As argued previously in Chapter 2 Section 2.3.5.3., research into the effectiveness of advertising disclosure cues on social media platforms is far from unequivocal and reports mixed results (Kay, Mulcahy, Sutherland and Lawley, 2023). Additionally, in terms of attitudinal advertising literacy, it was interesting to note that whilst children's suspicions or sceptical attitudes might be raised by an overly positive message or call to action, this can actually be assuaged by a number of factors. For example, if children believe that the message is coming from a source that they like, admire or trust (i.e. an influencer, content creator or 'YouTuber'), then they may pay more attention to it, be more inclined to believe the claims made in the message and perceive it as a genuine endorsement.

In terms of consensus, previous research has validated that consumers (of all ages) must see a disclosure cue in order to recognise something as an advertisement (De Vierman and Hudders 2019). Although, to be effective in communicating the commercial intent, these disclosure cues not only need to be noticed, but "consciously processed" (Krouwer et al., 2017, p125). Hence, an issue arises where disclosure cues are missing or hidden, because without the trigger of the cue, it is possible that paid-for endorsements can appear as genuine endorsements. Furthermore, if the persuasive messages themselves are highly integrated with the content, as it is argued is often the case with influencer marketing and sponsored videos on YouTube and TikTok, the assumption is that the persuasive intent will be harder to recognise, which in turn is less likely to trigger critical processing by the viewer (Buijzen et al., 2010). Not only is the content less likely to be processed, but as these findings indicate, where a disclosure cue is disguised, hidden or missing in the online environment, then children may actually interpret this differently. For example, they may perceive an incentivised review as a genuine review, endorsement or recommendation for the product, game or brand featured in the content. In contrast, where the selling and/or persuasive intent of content is made more conspicuous with the presence of a disclosure clue, previous

evidence suggests that customers are sceptical of this and may react more negatively towards the featured brand, (De Vierman and Hudders, 2019; van Dam and van Reijmersdal, 2019).

In that respect, it is not difficult to see how this may deter brands from ensuring that their chosen influencers are transparent about their commercial motives for producing content that promotes a brand, or make positive claims or recommendations about a product. This is despite the fact that the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has clear guidelines relating to the need for transparency in influencer marketing and it has the power to ban advertisements that do not adhere to the rules (ASA, 2023). The understanding that it is possible that there may be a failure to properly disclose and communicate the commercial agenda or financial/beneficial arrangement between brands and influencers raises ethical concerns over the potential that children will be exposed to misleading or deceptive marketing techniques in the contemporary media environment, which has been noted by previous researchers (Herrewijn, De Jans, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2021). This concern is intensified further by one of the most interesting insights revealed by this research. On the surface, children appeared to have good faith in their own advertising literacy abilities and skills, which seemed to be a direct consequence of their familiarity with the practice of ‘advertising’ (see Section 4.2.6) and is considered to be an encouraging finding from an advertising literacy perspective. The existing literature offers a potential explanation for these findings. For example, as noted in Section 2.2.2.6.1, Dispositional advertising literacy can manifest in terms of the possession of advertising knowledge and an ability to resist persuasive manipulation (Hudders et al., 2017; Zarouali et al., 2019; Sweeney et al., 2021). All of the participants reported feeling confident in their own abilities to correctly distinguish advertising from other forms of media material and that it was not something that they found particularly difficult (see Section 4.2.6.3).

However, during further analysis, it became apparent that at a deeper level, there was actually a common misperception amongst most of the participants with regards to their expectations of the existence, format and the way that advertising is disclosed, most noticeably in the online environment. In practice, children’s everyday exposure to commercialised content is likely to be much higher than they realise. Where these findings add value, is that they shed light on children’s own perspectives of their Dispositional advertising literacy, which is important and ought to be considered in debates around children’s vulnerability and competence as consumers and conversations around children’s advertising policy.

As explained previously, participants in this research expressed a tendency to assume that all advertisements online are required by law to clearly communicate their underlying commercial intent. In addition, these findings indicate that children appear to assume, and therefore rely upon there being a clear demarcation between entertainment and commercial content online. Participants explained this assumption by discussing their understanding that this distinction is achieved by conforming to a standard, recognisable format or through the use of textual, visual or verbal advertising disclosures (see Section 4.2.4). Indeed, as it was just discussed, it is now common practice for the communication of commercial intent to be highly integrated with the surrounding content online (Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, 2018). Therefore, in the absence of any hints or cues and because of its immersive nature, children are unlikely to consciously and critically process such content as a form of advertising, based on the misconception that it cannot be an advertisement because if it was, it would have to say it was (see Section 4.2.6.3). In other words, despite suggesting that children's Dispositional advertising literacy is likely to be activated in response to the immediate context within which an advertisement is seen, these insights suggest that this may not always result in the enactment of a 'critical response' i.e. as a result of their Situational advertising literacy.

5.2.1.2 Convergence of the Real World and the Virtual World

As the findings of Theme One also indicate, there appears to be convergence happening between the physical and virtual realms when it comes to children's consumption. For example, it was evident amongst the children who participated in this research that they are involved in exchanges of value in many different aspects of their everyday lives. From a theoretical perspective, this is considered to be significant because historically, marketing as a practice was defined as an exchange of value (Alderson, 1957). Whilst there have been multiple extensions and revised operationalisations of the marketing mix over time (Shaw, 2009), the idea that "the marketplace ensures all goods are... valued through their exchange" (Kline, 1993, p9) has remained fairly constant. Indeed, despite all of the changes in marketing theory over the years, scholars still appear to emphasise the importance of value as a central concept in their definitions. For example, Londhe (2014) proposes a conceptual model based on '4 Values'; 1) valued customers, 2) value to the customers, 3) value to society and 4) value to the marketer. Londhe (2014) argues that this model is better suited to the reciprocal and cyclical nature of marketing practice in today's digital society as an alternative to the original '4Ps' model of the marketing mix, i.e. product, place, price and promotion

(McCarthy, 1964) because every stakeholder involved in the marketing process expects some form of “value” (Londhe, 2014, p335).

5.2.1.3 Children’s Consumption in the Real-World

In the physical environment, children are regularly involved in family purchase decisions, for example during trips to the supermarket for grocery shopping, restaurant visits and family leisure activities. These findings support the suggestion children do influence family spending in different ways (Gunter and Furnham, 1998; Buckingham, 2000; Anitha and Mohan, 2016). Findings also suggest that parents value their children’s opinions on such matters (Thomas et al., 2007; McLeay and Oglethorpe, 2013) despite the dominance of research that has tended to take a negative view of this influence (Ebster et al., 2009; Wingert et al., 2014). As highlighted in Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2, this bad reputation is the result of scholars’ repeated attempts to understand “pester power” (Ebster et al., 2009) defined by Henry and Borzekowski (2011, p298) as “the tendency of children who are bombarded with marketers’ messages to unrelentingly request advertised items” from their caregivers. On the one hand, the findings of this research appear to support the suggestion that children do resort to “pester power” tactics as an effective way of persuading their parents and carers to buy certain items for them. However, in contrast to the definition put forward by Henry and Borzekowski (2011), the participants in this research explained that this behaviour was not always driven by the influence of marketing and advertising messages. For them, “pester power” was the method of choice in situations where they were trying to convince their parents to purchase items that they believed their parents would disapprove of. For example, fast foods, snacks and sweets (HFSS foods) that were typically unhealthy, computer video games that were considered to be overpriced and/or age-inappropriate, as well as ‘novelty’ items, (such as the ‘fidget’ toys that were popular at the time of this research), which are typically low cost but generally still considered by participants’ parents to be a waste of money because of their poor quality, impracticality and/or perceived lack of any utilitarian value.

In this respect, these insights support the suggestion put forward by McLeay and Oglethorpe (2013) that the neutral term “purchase request behaviour” may be a more appropriate term to represent the purchase negotiations that take place between children and their parents in real-life. On the other hand, there was still clear evidence that children’s purchase requests are heavily influenced by advertising and commercialised content, yet children did not always have to resort to pester power in order to convince their parents to acquiesce to their requests

for certain products such as books, which were typically assumed to have an educational value and essential items such as clothes.

5.2.1.4 Children's Consumption in the Virtual Marketplace

In the online environment, children regularly make deals with other players within online games and virtual worlds such as Roblox, and often they will choose to spend real money on intangible items, such as in-game currency for example by spending £5 in order to acquire 400 Robux. The purchase of in-game currency appears to enhance their online experience by allowing them to purchase the rarest and most coveted items available within an online game, items which can then be traded with other players.

Whilst it is ultimately ethereal, the metaverse appears to be becoming as 'real' an environment as the physical universe for children, in terms of the socio-contextual elements of children's lives, which exist online in parallel with the nature of the real, physical world. This is an important point to acknowledge because in today's society, commercialisation permeates both environments as evidenced here and in recent work by Dwivedi et al., (2022). Whilst it not a necessarily new concept (Stephenson, 1992), in terms of this research, the metaverse is best understood as defined by Ball, (2022, p29) who describes it the metaverse in the contemporary media environment as:

“a massively scaled and interoperable network of real-time rendered three-dimensional (3D) virtual worlds that can be experienced synchronously and persistently by an effectively unlimited number of users with an individual sense of presence, and with continuity of data, such as identity, history, entitlements, objects, communications and payments”.

The metaverse incorporates social media platforms and online communities including the two social games that were frequently mentioned by the participants of this research; Roblox and Fortnite, which both feature interaction within virtual worlds (Meier, Saorin, Bonnet De Leon and Guerrero Cobos, 2020). Furthermore, the metaverse also exists as a space that is free from geographical or physical restrictions. Therefore, it is understandable that the metaverse provided a social lifeline for young people during the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ofcom, 2022), which resulted in an extended living situation of reduced social contact, isolation and home-schooling for young people across the UK (Ofcom, 2022). Indeed, the use of the video-sharing platform TikTok grew exponentially during the period of January to June to in 2020 during the first national lockdown in the UK from 3 million to 15 million

users (Ofcom, 2020) as a creative outlet for alleviating boredom and expressing emotions (Montag, Yang and Elhai, 2021). Evidently, many companies and brands were quick to acknowledge this and capitalise on the situation and the growth in a captive and potentially profitable new audience (Feldkamp, 2021). As it was revealed by the participants of this research (see Section 4.3.2.1), immersion in the metaverse became a fundamental aspect of their everyday lives during this time by enabling them to stay in touch with their friends and peers as well as keep in contact with others from across the world with whom they share similar interests.

Aside from embedded online advertising as it appears on video-service platforms, there is also the issue of the increasingly subtle commercialisation that exists within the metaverse, which warrants further attention. Previous research has highlighted the need to understand more about the ways in which children's virtual environments are being commercialised (Marsh, 2015) yet this remains a relatively under-researched topic within children's marketing. As outlined previously, during the initial content analysis work, the researcher identified two examples of brand infiltration into the online game; Roblox.

The first example relates to the option offered to users whereby in-game currency (Robux) can be used to purchase branded 'clothing' to customise the appearance of players virtual avatars such as T-Shirts adorned with well-known logos or brand names such as *Adidas* and *Nike* (see Images 5.1 and 5.2).

Image 5.1 Adidas-branded Clothing/Skin available for purchase in Roblox



(Source: Roblox, 2023).

Image 5.2 Nike-branded Clothing/Skin available for purchase in Roblox



(Source: Roblox, 2023).

The next example refers to the promotion of a Roblox-branded NERF toy gun within the sub-game; Adopt Me. This particular toy is the result of a collaboration between Hasbro; the manufacturer of NERF guns and Roblox, resulting in the launch of a range of NERF/Roblox gun models. These toys are available to purchase from a number of UK Toy retailers in the hope that they will “bring Roblox to life” in the real world (Hasbro, 2023, n.p.). The researcher also discovered what can only be described as an advertisement for one of the NERF/Roblox guns, which was very subtly integrated into the virtual marketplace as it exists in the ‘Adopt Me’ mini game as shown in Image 5.3

Image 5.3 Nerf brand placement with Roblox



(Source: Roblox, 2023).

Returning to the findings of this PhD research, despite sharing the opinion that ‘advertising is everywhere’, when participants were asked about the presence of advertising in Roblox, some actually thought that this was a trick question. Indeed, the consensus amongst the children was that there are no advertisements in Roblox, or in any other online games for that matter. This line of questioning was important given the researcher’s awareness of the presence of brands within these games and the significant amount of time that the participants devoted to virtual environments (as indicated during the workshops). It was clear that gaming and participation in the various communities that exist within Roblox and Fortnite (see 4.3.2.1) is a major leisure activity for children. This was obvious from the initial analysis of the very first workshop and continued to be a significant topic of conversation throughout the peer interviews. Therefore, it was particularly interesting to note that despite their awareness of online advertising and their penchant for gaming, participants were not yet aware that commercialisation has also started to sneak into these virtual environments.

As a result, it appears that in-game advertising and brand placement within games is not yet an easily recognised form of advertising by children, nor is it subject to the same negative attitudes as the more intrusive formats are. This is obviously a concern when it comes to children’s ability to recognise embedded advertising formats online.

One possible explanation for participants’ lack of awareness could be that the types of in-game advertising and brand placement described here do not reduce the functionality of the

game in the same way that the more obvious and well-known forms of online advertising do, such as the ‘pop-up’ advertisements, or pre-roll and mid-roll television-like advertisements that appear on video-sharing platforms (Vanwesenbeeck, Hudders and Ponnet, 2020). As mentioned previously, children appear to equate the presence of advertising with a loss of functionality or an interruption of sorts. This is potentially an important element of advertising literacy that has been overlooked in previous research. Thus, research such as this PhD thesis that considers multiple types of commercial content and how children actually interact with them (Friestad and Wright, 2004; Jones and Glynn, 2019) as well as the characteristics that may affect children’s responses to advertising, (Hudders et al., 2017b) is considered to be especially valuable to the marketing discipline from both academic and policy perspectives (Nairn and Fine, 2008; Buijzen et al., 2010; Lawlor et al., 2016; Nelson, 2018; Jaakkola, 2019).

Therefore, where this PhD research contributes to theory here is through the findings relating to how children may interpret other content characteristics as a way of making sense of advertisements. Characteristics that enable them to decode less conspicuous or covert commercial motives. This PhD research emphasises that it is important to pay attention to the characteristics of children’s content in advertising and advertising literacy research. This includes focusing on its form and function but it also means that researchers must make the effort to understand children’s perceptions and awareness of contemporary advertising formats. This includes commercially-motivated messages, the audio, visual and textual ways that products and services are promoted and children’s evaluation, assessment and judgement of the source (i.e. the person or people) delivering the message.

From a theoretical perspective, research that focuses on the ways in which advertising is evaluated by children in a holistic sense, helps to reframe the advertising literacy debate away from ‘ages and stages’ theories of child development based on historical studies (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008; Nairn and Fine, 2008; Rozendaal, Lapierre, van Reijmersdal and Buijzen, 2011; Nelson, 2018). Furthermore, this alternative theoretical perspective also highlights a number of important implications for contemporary advertising policy and practice, which are covered in the following Chapter; Chapter 6 (Conclusions).

5.2.2 Theme Two: Marketing's role in Children's Lifestyle and Identity Formation

As emphasised in the literature review (Sections 2.4.2 – 2.4.3) very few researchers adequately address the social context of consumption (Martens et al., 2004) nor do they acknowledge it “as a practice or social force that is worthy of much attention” (Cook, 2004b, p148). This is a sentiment that appears to ring true throughout both children's consumption research and children's marketing research. As a consequence, there may be valuable insights into the social, material and cultural structures of children's consumption that are being overlooked in advertising literacy research (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008). Hence, the second research question in this thesis was developed to address this issue and the imbalance in previous advertising literacy research, which has mainly focused on the individual processes underlying children's recognition of, and their understanding of the purpose of commercial material (De Jans et al., 2017) as opposed to also considering their interactions with contemporary advertising material (Jones and Glynn, 2019) from a social perspective and how this might relate to their overall understanding of commercial persuasion in all its formats. This question can also be seen to be a direct reflection of the interdisciplinary approach adopted in this PhD.

RQ2: What can a sociological perspective on consumption reveal about the nature of children's advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment?

5.2.2.1 Social Influences on Children's Consumption

To elaborate on the value of drawing from sociology and to provide some context for the findings discussed in this section, it is useful to highlight the argument that when the practice of consumption is linked with social context it becomes easier to understand the behaviour and attitudes of "real" consumers (Mitchell and Imrie, 2011, p40). Granted, it is somewhat difficult to reach a definitive conclusion as to what is meant by 'real' consumers because of the ambiguity associated with the word 'real'. However, for Mitchell and Imrie (2011, p40) a 'real' consumer can be defined in terms of both the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that shape a person's consumer behaviour. It is therefore crucial that researchers who want to situate the study of consumption within its social context first recognise that “social associations are the most important influence on an individual's consumption decisions” (Mitchell and Imrie, 2011, p40) and that these are a central tenet of most, if not all advertising communications (Phillips, 1997; Leiss et al., 2018).

5.2.2.2. Children's Membership of Consumer 'Tribes'

Some believe that a person's consumer behaviour is primarily influenced by the social associations of goods that relate to the membership of particular 'tribes' or groups (Cova and Cova, 2002). Thus, consumer behaviour is inextricably linked to a person's own authentic identity and the importance they place on ascertaining a sense of belonging (Cova and Cova, 2002). In addition, the social associations of goods and brands are not fixed, they are capricious and changeable in response to variations in a person's situation and lifestyle (Maffesoli, 1996). Whilst it has roots in the field of tribal marketing research, the concept of belonging to a consumer 'tribe' (Kozinets, 1999; Cova, Kozinets and Shankar, 2015) is also considered to be relevant here in helping to explain some of the key findings in Theme Two in this research; *Marketing's role in children's lifestyle and identity formation*.

Indeed, it was interesting to note the evidence of links or associations between the participants' preferences, perceptions and interpretations of 'advertising' (encompassing the multiple formats of contemporary marketing as noted earlier in 4.2.2) and the social elements of consumption. For example, there was unequivocal evidence that brands in particular tend to be appraised by children in terms of their perceived social value. In building on these insights, it was possible to analyse and explore the ways in which children develop their consumer preferences, their knowledge of the marketplace and how they learn what it means to consume. These insights also support the overall conclusions drawn by Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, (2008, p638) that brands and their associations "play an important role in children's everyday social networks and cultural practice".

As it was noted in the literature review (Section 2.4.3), sociological perspectives on consumption acknowledge that all commodities represent more than just the tangible result of a transactional exchange of value between a buyer and a seller (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979). Commodities are understood to possess a dual nature, in that they can serve as both functional objects and social symbols (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979). In this research, the term 'social symbols' is interpreted in terms of the intangible aspects of commodities that may manifest in many forms but share a common meaning, which is anchored in a connection to one or more elements of social life. In building on Maffesoli's ideas (1996), these symbols are also understood to vary in their perceived importance and influence on a consumer at any given time, depending on situational changes in a person's life.

As it was evidenced in Chapter 4 (Section 4.3.2), the children in this research do appear to consider advertised or promoted commodities in terms of a dual-nature. Furthermore, this was the case in both indirect and direct situations relating to the acquisition of material goods. For example, both when requesting an item be purchased on their behalf (i.e. by someone else such as a parent) and when they have the responsibility for making a decision and completing a transaction themselves. The motivation to acquire something simply because “everyone else had it” was frequently mentioned throughout the peer interviews.

5.2.2.3 Peer Influence on Children’s Consumer Behaviour

At one level, these findings lend support for prior research that suggests that friends and peers are a significant influence on children’s consumer behaviour (Moschis and Churchill, 1978; Su and Tong, 2020). Indeed, returning to the historical literature, Ward (1974, p3) originally described that it is important for researchers to:

“understand how children acquire attitudes about the social significance of goods, or more precisely, how people learn to perceive that the acquisition of some kinds of products or brands... can be instrumental to successful social role enactment”.

These findings align with this established reasoning that children’s purchase decisions and requests are often driven by a ‘need’ to fit in with their friends and peers and that the acquisition of specific commodities may also serve a social purpose (Ward, 1974, Rodhain and Aurier, 2016; Hook and Kulczynski, 2021). These findings support the idea that the possession of the same items as their peers can reduce the risk that children will feel left out or ostracised from their friendship groups. The “social significance of goods” (Ward, 1974, p3) acts as a motivation, which is intensified when it comes to acquiring and possessing items from brands that are considered to be sought-after or ‘cool’ by their peers and friendship groups.

5.2.2.4 The Enduring Importance of the Concept of “Cool” in Children’s Consumption

Indeed, as it was highlighted in the previous Chapter (see 4.3.3), many participants explained that they felt that it was important to keep up with ‘cool’ trends not just in cultural terms of fashion, sport or music but also by specifically possessing certain items. These participants believed that not doing so would potentially have a negative impact on them socially, leading to feelings of jealousy, inadequacy or being left out of the group. For some participants, this notion of ‘fitting in’ was considered to be more of a necessity for social success rather than a superficial desire, upholding the views of early consumer socialisation researchers such as Ward (1974). These feelings were so strong that they also appeared to be a significant reason

for the purchase of items that were, in reality, considered by participants to be a waste of money or of little practical use. In one respect, these findings lend support for the consideration of “the social and cultural context in which children's uses of consumer goods is embedded” (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008, p638) in terms of advancing advertising literacy theory. This idea is expanded on in more depth in Section 5.2.3.

The existing literature offers a number of other potential explanations for the enduring influence of peers on children’s consumer behaviour. For example, from sociology, we can draw on Kline’s (1993, p7) observation that “goods... locate daily acts of consumption within the continuities of personal and family history, group and national styles... [and] the wayward quest for knowing oneself.” . This observation appears to share the central ideas of tribal marketing discussed so far (Kozinets, 1999). These ideas are thought relevant to the participants of this research, who at the ages of 9, 10 and 11 were at the beginning of adolescence, where the concept of identity is notoriously fragile and transient (Wyness, 2006). However, that is not to say that all children of this age group would feel the same, merely that the general consensus is that those children who are most susceptible to peer pressure (of all kinds) are the ones who also place a level of importance on establishing their own identity (Pfeifer and Berkman, 2018).

Another explanation can be found in the concept of conspicuous consumption, whereby the ownership and possession of products and brands is actively and openly communicated by a consumer in some way to send a message to others (Bronner and de Hoog, 2019). This may also help to explain why children want to publicly reinforce their membership of a group through the presentation of a shared identity, and the important role that brand ownership plays in this process. In this respect, these findings also support previous work that indicates that children’s use of brands can contribute to the maintenance of a peer culture (Hémar-Nicolas and Rodhain, 2017) and that this deliberate brand alignment can enhance a child’s sense of belonging to a group.

As it was discussed previously in Section 2.2.1.3, there is evidence that children learn about the particulars of the marketplace and what it means to be a ‘consumer’ through their everyday relationships at home and at school (Corsaro, 1992; Sparrman et al, 2012), as well as through the media by watching television programmes and films (Nelson and McLeod, 2005).

Adding to this, the findings of this PhD research have shown that multiple socio-contextual influences on children's consumer behaviour are also present in the online environments where children do not expect advertising to exist. Therefore, based on these findings, it can also be argued that there is an element of consumer socialisation that exists in the use of video-sharing platforms such as TikTok and YouTube and through children's various interactions within the metaverse via social games and within virtual worlds.

As it has already been mentioned earlier, a significant proportion of children's leisure time remains devoted to the metaverse and 'gaming' is a significant leisure activity. On this point, whilst the importance of video games in childhood has been studied from many perspectives including medicine (Tarakci et al., 2016; Gao et al., 2018), education (Gee, 2003; Brown, 2015) and psychology (Boxter, Groves and Docherty, 2015), on balance these studies have focused on the more the use of traditional video games that have provided a key source of entertainment for children since the 1980s (Kline, 1993; Gunter, 1998). Hence, it is also important to acknowledge the impact that the Internet has had on the evolution of these games.

Firstly, as suggested by these findings, children's participation in these games appears to have evolved from a more passive pastime into an important social activity and a potential marker of group identity. Furthermore, there is also evidence to suggest to support the idea that there is an element of contextual spillover into the real world, for example when children choose to wear a YouTuber's-branded merchandise or purchase a celebrity's perfume to publicly identify themselves as a member of a fan community (Dare-Edwards, 2019). In further support of this, Jones and Glynn (2019, p94) make reference to the opportunities that virtual environments create for interactions between children, celebrities and communities of other fans. With this in mind, these findings can be taken to support the general suggestion that the media plays an increasingly important role in shaping children's consumer behaviour and attitudes as argued previously (Nelson and McLeod, 2005). This is especially relevant as exposure to commercial content continues to increase in young people (Rideout et al., 2010; Rideout and Robb, 2018; Ofcom, 2022). From the interpretation of these findings, it certainly seems that immersion in the metaverse offers something more than passive entertainment for children and therefore it is worthy of further consideration as part of contemporary definitions of 'the media' and how this might be commercialised.

In considering the marketing literature, these findings also concur with prior research, which has also demonstrated that the public act of associating with a brand can serve as a way of presenting a socially acceptable image online as a form of self expression (Lawlor et al., 2016) as well as in the physical, real-world environment, in terms of the choices children make regarding their physical image, where they may demonstrate strong preferences for the ownership of specific brands of clothing, accessories or food items that are deemed to be particularly cool or trendy at the time (Kim et al., 2003; Schor, 2005; Nairn, Omrod and Bottomley, 2007; Nairn and Spotswood, 2015).

As also evidenced by these findings, exposure to an advertisement alone is rarely the main reason behind a child's desire to acquire a specific product. It certainly seems to be the case that exposure to advertising triggers product and brand awareness and information-seeking behaviours in children (Hudders et al., 2017). However, what is interesting about these PhD findings is that they also indicate that the symbolic aspects of an item and its perceived social associations can also influence the way an advertisement is interpreted in terms of children's perceptions of the product, as well as the featured brand, the source (person) of the communication and the advertisement itself. This is novel in the sense that it has rarely been acknowledged in prior research. To elaborate further, there is evidence in this research that the way these factors relating to characteristics are interpreted by children can play a role in their overall level of persuasion. To elaborate, returning to one of the key points in the preceding paragraphs, the children in this research expressed an eagerness to fit in with their friends and peers but also a desire to establish their own identities as individuals too. These children regularly consult their friends and peers about what trends to follow and what brands are considered socially desirable, (usually determined by popular opinion) as has been suggested by other researchers (Rozendaal et al., 2013).

5.2.2.5 Children as Consumers: Empowered or Vulnerable? Rational or Impulsive?

Another interesting insight was that in addition to considering the social elements of consumption, brands and products appear to be evaluated by children in terms of more traditional or 'rational' factors as well, such as the perceived quality, function, availability or affordability of the branded product itself. Again, this is novel, as it suggests a view of children's consumption that has rarely been explored in advertising literacy research, despite previous assertions that the social elements of advertising are worthy of attention (Phillips, 1997; Schor, 2005; Leiss et al., 2018). To elaborate, participants in this research explained

how they make their own judgements as part of their pre-purchase decision making process. These decisions appear to be based on children's existing knowledge of the marketplace, as well as their prior experience with the advertised commodity. This was the case regardless of the format of communication, whether online or offline and even in circumstances where the communication is not necessarily targeted at children themselves. There was an emphasis here on evaluating the advertised product experience versus actual product experience (see Section 4.4.5.)

Despite this, there is clearly a social link here, in that children have a clear tendency to seek out the opinions of their friends and peers to assist them in their consumer decisions. In bringing all of these insights together, this thesis argues that this is where there is value in considering children's culture and consumption in advertising literacy research and how this links with their understanding of child-targeted marketing. This suggestion also aligns with Kline's (1993, p42) definition of marketing communications as:

“a form of social narrative whose primary task is to convey those fictional social relations which can only be found in and through product ownership and use. Advertisers choose not to discuss goods as material things, but rather as motivated social symbols nested in stories about everyday life”

In adopting the view that the central tenet of literacy is the process of 'sensemaking' or the 'reading' of advertising (Ritson and Elliott, 1995) as outlined previously in Section 2.2.2, it is possible to explore how the social interactions facilitated by such readings relate to the ways that these interactions are used to construct self and group identities (O'Donohoe and Tynan, 1998). In other words, how the appreciation that goods, commodities and brands can have important social value for children and how this may facilitate the enhancement of advertising literacy theory by offering an explanation as to why advertising can still be persuasive even when it is recognised and understood to be such by children.

5.2.3 Theme Three: Children's Evaluation of Advertising

In keeping with the overall interdisciplinary approach, it was also important to consider the links between consumption and practice (Martens et al., 2004; Sparrman et al., 2012) throughout this research as indicated by the literature review. This consideration led to the development of the third and final research question,

RQ3: How is children's advertising literacy enacted in practice?

This question facilitated the exploration of the social and relational nature of development and enabled the researcher to undertake meaning-based, contextual research (Lawlor and Prothero, 2002) which resulted in the formation of the third Theme; *Children's Evaluation of Marketing*. At its core, this theme reflects the sociological perspectives on children's consumption that have influenced this PhD research. Specifically, exploring the perspectives that facilitated an exploration of how "commercial-imposed meaning and personal identity creation blend together at the level of practice" in early childhood (Cook, 2004b, p1510) and how this links to children's understanding of contemporary advertising.

Indeed, one of the most interesting findings of this research was uncovering children's willingness and ability to evaluate commercially motivated content when deciding what products to buy (see 4.4.7). In essence, these findings show that when children recognise an advertisement, they engage in a process of evaluating the material/content in terms of their perceptions of a product itself, the way a message is portrayed and their judgement of the source of the persuasion. Sometimes this is done intuitively based on their perceptions of the proposed symbolic aspects of the advertised commodity or the perceived congruence and relatability of the source of the commercially-motivated message and use this as a partial basis of their purchase decisions. In line with the explanations of previous research, this appeared to be due to the nature of contemporary advertising formats, which work on a subconscious level and elicit emotional, rather than rational responses (Holmberg, 2017).

In one respect, these findings contradict previous work, which has suggested that children aged 9 - 11 years old do *not* make purchase decisions based on their conscious and balanced evaluations of commercialised material (Albert and Steinberg, 2011; Fong and Zolkepli, 2019). However, what is novel about these findings in relation to advertising literacy theory is that they indicate that even in the absence of recognition of commercial intent, children still attempt to *evaluate* advertisements by considering the merits of its message or call to action. These findings suggest that children are more inclined to engage in this process of evaluation where they are exposed to commercially motivated material and content that captures their attention and appeals to them in some way. From the opposite perspective, these findings also indicate that children will choose to simply ignore or disregard advertisements that do not appeal to them because they are perceived to be annoying, irrelevant or inappropriate (see 4.2.6.1) or they may not even recognise them at

all. This is important in terms of expanding how moral dimensions of advertising literacy are defined.

In the case of embedded marketing, these findings also support the suggestions of previous research that children are receptive to product-targeted advertising online, and not because embedded advertisements are perceived as being more relevant, but because they are not recognised as being commercially motivated (van Reijmersdal et al., 2016). In this respect, these findings confirm earlier work by showing that persuasion does not have to be explicit to have an effect on people (Schindler et al., 2017; Glaser and Reisinger, 2022). Covert or embedded marketing formats can have a positive influence on how much children actually like an advertisement regardless of the product or service it has been designed to promote. To extend this idea, these findings also indicate that children are more receptive to messages that do not appear to be commercially motivated, suggesting that the more implicit persuasion is, the more effective it can be. What remains unclear is whether the effects of persuasion are negative, positive or a neutral mixture of both.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions to Children’s Advertising Literacy Theory

Findings from all three of the themes presented in this thesis are considered to contribute to children’s advertising literacy theory in some way, albeit with varying degrees of novelty. For instance, contributions range from a simple confirmation of prior research findings to a possible extension of advertising literacy theory in terms of its attitudinal and moral dimensions. However, insights from Theme Three (Evaluation) are particularly significant in relation to Situational advertising literacy and the way that children evaluate contemporary advertising formats in situ (as explained in the following Section 5.3.1).

5.3.1 Reconsidering Children’s Advertising Literacy in Terms of Practice

As introduced previously, it is certainly possible to conceptualise children’s advertising literacy as a practice by building on the concept of literacy as something that is lived by children through their practices (O’Donohoe and Tynan, 1998), daily interactions (Rockhill, 1987) and in terms of the skills involved in ‘reading’ advertisements as introduced in previous research (Ritson and Elliott, 1995). Furthermore, literacy as a practice can also be understood in terms of the social interactions that are facilitated by the reading of commercialised material and content as well as the ways in which these interactions are used to construct self and group identities (Ritson and Elliot, 1995) as was indicated by the insights in Theme Two. As such, applying this concept facilitates the inclusion of socio-contextual aspects of children’s lives that are arguably missing from current conceptualisations of children’s advertising literacy, such as their relationships with peers, their own hobbies and interests and what is considered to be “cool” at the time. This is important because marketers are naturally aware of the immense power that ‘coolness’ has to sell products and services and they are experts at capitalising on this (Nancarrow and Nancarrow, 2011) particularly in the ways that they target the youth market (Keller and Kalmus, 2009).

Taking these findings into account, it is suggested that children’s advertising literacy should be considered in broader terms. It is important to explore children’s consumption in context. The process of persuasion and consumer behaviour is complex and situationally dependent (Freistad and Wright, 1994). Indeed, it is argued that the contemporary advertising environment is not “a formless cascade of [advertisements] that descend upon a mêlée of viewers, with the statistically inevitable result that sometimes a viewer buys something that

was promoted in an ad to which the viewer was recently exposed” (Hackley and Hackley, 2022, p79).

These findings indicate that regardless of whether advertising literacy is defined as an ability, knowledge or a set of skills (Kunkel, 2010; De Jans et al., 2019), it probably extends beyond the mere recognition of commercial intent as has previously been the case. In addition, recognition of advertising does not necessarily reduce its effectiveness (Lampert et al., 2021), nor is it the case that persuasion knowledge inevitably increases scepticism in every situation. It is true that Consumer Socialisation Theory (Ward, 1974; John, 1999) does acknowledge this in part. Nevertheless, it can be argued that both cognitive developmental and consumer socialisation perspectives only really offer partial explanations of how children acquire persuasion knowledge and marketplace experience with a relatively limited explanation as to how these might be applied in situ (i.e. in practice). The most common application being a reduction in a child’s susceptibility to advertising and the development of a more sceptical attitude towards commercialised material (Valkenburg, 2000; Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Rozendaal et al., 2011; Rozendaal et al., 2016; De Jans et al., 2017; Nelson, 2018; Zarouali et al., 2019; Oprea et al., 2021).

At present, there is very little evidence to support the counter argument that in practice, children can interpret commercial persuasion attempts in a neutral way, to the point where they are able to understand the message and recognise the underlying purpose of the communication (Moses and Baldwin, 2005) and use the available information more heuristically to evaluate the value of the product or service on offer (De Pauw et al., 2018). This is still the case, despite the findings of the aforementioned studies and the propositions of the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright, 1994) on which so much advertising literacy research has been based. To reiterate, Friestad and Wright (1994, p3) state in their original research that persuasion knowledge is *not* typically used to “resist” persuasion. Rather in practice, consumers can ‘cope’ with persuasive attempts by trusting the marketer and believing the message, particularly where credible persuasive tactics are used (Isaac and Grayson, 2017). As these findings indicate, the perceived ‘credibility’ of persuasive tactics (regardless of format) appears to be heavily dependent on the advertisement’s ability to communicate the social associations of the featured brand or product (See Section 4.2.5).

Thus, these findings offer insights into the concept of peer influence as it manifests within the contemporary media environment. To elaborate, they provide tentative evidence that familiarity, similarity, relevance, and personality are important dimensions of what constitutes a ‘peer’ and the context within which peer influence is present and effective (see Sections 2.3.6.2 and 2.3.6.3). This differs from traditional models of celebrity endorsement and influencer marketing by challenging the dominant assumption that ‘extraordinary’ people are always more influential than ‘ordinary’ people. Whilst there has been a significant increase in research into influencer marketing over the last five years, there is still a gap in terms of children’s perspectives relating to their understanding of it as a form of advertising and the role it plays in their consumption preferences and behaviour.

As a result of this research, there are new insights into children’s consumer culture, which despite its theoretical relevance has rarely been considered in previous advertising literacy research. Furthermore, these insights offer proof of the value of empowering children through participatory methodologies in advertising research, which also has implications for advertising regulation and policymaking as discussed later in Section 6.3.

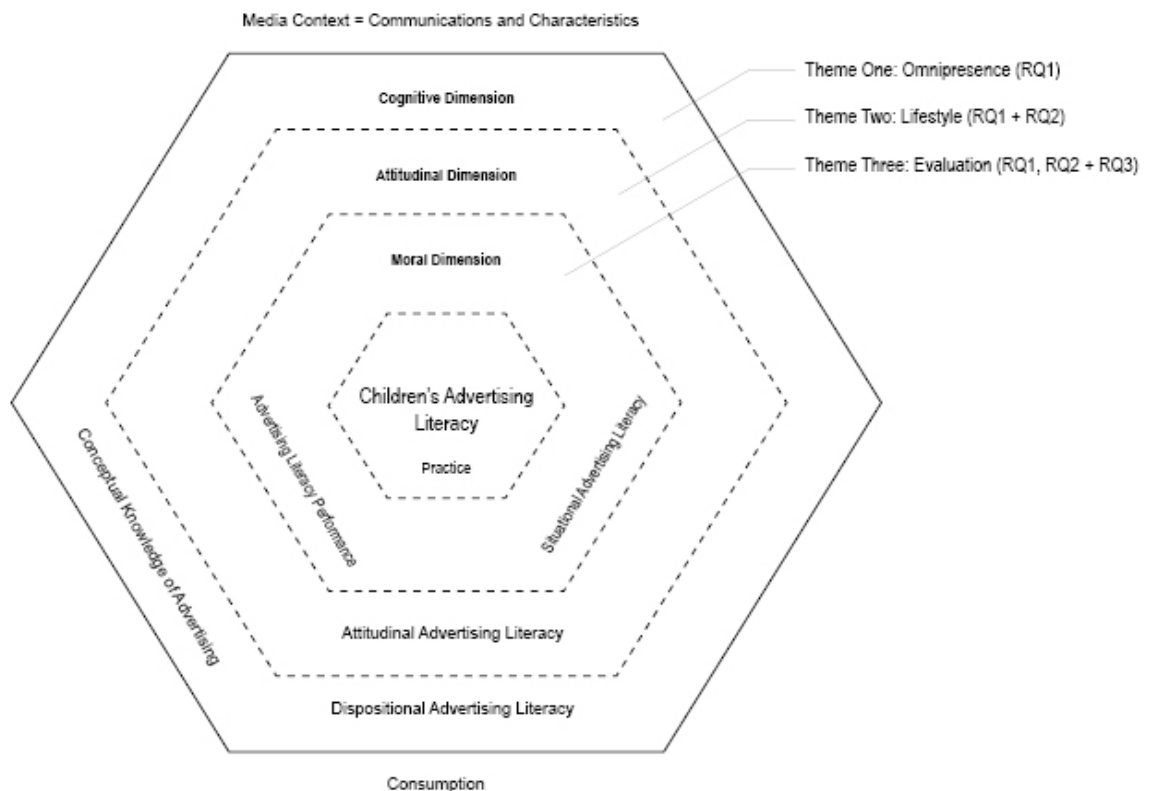
As evidenced by the findings of this research, children will often choose to ignore advertisements that they perceive to be irrelevant. They may also employ strategies to avoid such content where they can, such as fast-forwarding the advertisements on television channels and skipping or scrolling past commercial content online. Some suggested that this avoidant behaviour is the result of consumers being in a goal-directed state when using the Internet (Goodrich, Schiller, and Galletta 2015; Seyedghorban, Tahernejad, and Matanda 2016). In other words, consumers may simply have less patience and reduced tolerance for advertisements that interrupt or delay what they are trying to do. For example, when children encounter pre-roll advertisements that appear before their chosen video on YouTube. Whilst advertising avoidance behaviour is by no means a new area of research, there remains a lack of insight into advertising avoidance in the online environment (Campbell et al., 2017; Kim, Lee and Suh, 2023) amongst adults and children. Hence, these findings contribute to the literature here. As highlighted in Theme Two (Section 4.3), the social associations of brands and products played a significant role in children’s interpretations of perceived value and their overall evaluation of commercialised communication. In support of earlier research, children’s consumer behaviour appears to be influenced by their evaluation of multiple

functional, symbolic and hedonic factors that are portrayed in commercialised content and material (Achenreiner and John, 2003). By exploring the nature of commercially-persuasive appeal, it is possible to provide an explanation as to why advertising is still persuasive even when one recognises it to be so. The emphasis here is on how ‘advertising’ is read by children, in other words how it is interpreted . Therefore, this PhD research specifically responds to Castonguay and Messina’s (2022b) call to expand existing theories of persuasion knowledge by also incorporating the concept of content evaluations.

5.3.1.1 Developing the Layers of Literacy Conceptual Framework

The thesis introduces a conceptual framework (shown in Figure 5.1), which also positions advertising literacy as a multidimensional concept.

Figure 5.1 ‘Layers of Literacy’ Conceptual Framework



(Source: Author’s own work).

Table 5.2 Layers of Literacy Dimensions

Element	Incorporated into Conceptual Framework	Theme
Cognitive Dimensions	Layer 1: “Conceptual advertising knowledge” Exposure PKM	Theme 1: Omnipresence
Attitudinal Dimensions	Layer 2: Attitudinal advertising literacy Dispositional advertising literacy Product experience	Theme 1: Omnipresence Theme 2: Lifestyle Theme: Three
Moral Dimensions	Layer 3: Situational advertising literacy	Theme 3: Evaluation
Activation of AL	Layer 1: Dispositional advertising literacy Layer 3: Advertising literacy performance	Theme 1: Omnipresence Theme 3: Evaluation
Application of AL in Situ	Layer 2: Attitudinal advertising literacy Layer 3: Advertising literacy performance Layer 3: Situational advertising literacy	Theme 3: Evaluation
Critical Responses	Layer 1: “Conceptual advertising knowledge” Exposure PKM Layer 1: Dispositional advertising literacy Layer 2: Attitudinal advertising literacy Layer 3: Advertising literacy performance Layer 3: Situational advertising literacy	Theme 1: Omnipresence Theme 2: Lifestyle Theme 3: Evaluation

(Source: Author’s own work).

All of these components should be considered relevant to the evaluative (i.e. moral) component of children’s advertising literacy. However, despite some indications in previous research of the potential significance of ‘evaluation’ in the context of advertising literacy (Hudders et al., 2017; van Dam and van Reijmersdal, 2019) it is presented in a narrow form, almost always linked to a critical attitude towards advertising and the function of advertising literacy as a defence against unwanted, negative advertising effects.

Introducing an approach to advertising literacy in terms of its various ‘layers’ is a more nuanced conceptualisation of advertising literacy. It is a new perspective that may be useful for academics who face the challenge of conducting research in a dynamic environment of continuously evolving and increasingly hard-to-recognise commercial formats. Each layer represents a different type of knowledge or skill relating to advertising understanding and are explained in detail in the following Sections 5.3.2 - 5.3.4. The layers reflect the findings of each of the three themes in relation to the three research questions.

5.3.2 Layer One - Theme One: *Omnipresence* (RQ1)

The outer layer of this framework illustrates children's awareness and expectations of marketing and advertising as they exist within the contemporary media environment as discussed in Theme One. In terms of how this compares with existing advertising literacy theory, this layer can be understood to represent children's conceptual knowledge of advertising, which is a central feature in existing definitions (Rozendaal et al., 2011; Hudders et al., 2017; Zarouali et al., 2019).

This is where the format and context of the commercial persuasion is important. For example, in the case of overt marketing, it is assumed that the presence of selling and persuasive intent (i.e. commercial intent) within the material/content will be conspicuous, recognisable or obvious to consumers. At this level, this framework assumes that the existence of the commercial intent may be conveyed via the various characteristics relating to message, source and product, which will trigger 'advertising' recognition (based on a child's existing conceptual knowledge of advertising). In the case of embedded marketing, the framework assumes that it is less likely that there will be any obvious trigger of advertising recognition.

5.3.3 Layer Two - Theme Two: *Lifestyle* (RQ1 + RQ2)

At the next level, it is necessary to consider children's perceptions and attitudes towards advertising, and their existing experience of products and brands as these may influence how persuasive communication is interpreted. Again, in comparison with existing theory, this next layer is a representation of the established concept of attitudinal advertising literacy (i.e. attitudes towards advertising in general) (Rozendaal et al., 2011) and also incorporates the existing concept of dispositional advertising literacy (Hudders et al., 2017).

In contrast to existing theory, this framework takes a broader view of attitudinal advertising literacy, by emphasising the importance of the social elements of children's consumption in the formulation of their attitudes towards advertising as a societal practice. It also extends this concept to include children's attitudes towards the characteristics of the advertisement itself, which may be positive, neutral or negative. Children's attitudes may be influenced by their own desires, their hobbies and interests and their individual and group identities.

5.3.4 Layer Three - Theme Three: Evaluation (RQ1 + RQ2 +RQ3)

The inner level of the framework seeks to represent the actual *application* of conceptual advertising knowledge and attitudinal advertising literacy in practice by building upon existing theory (Rozendaal et al., 2011, Hudders et al., 2017). As a whole, the Layers of Literacy framework assumes that true advertising literacy is evidenced via application. In accordance with existing theory, the concept of application shares a similar line of reasoning to that which underpins the concepts of situational and dispositional advertising literacy (Hudders et al., 2017). This framework extends these concepts evidencing that advertising literacy is enacted in practice through an evaluation of commercially-motivated persuasion attempts in terms of social and rational factors.

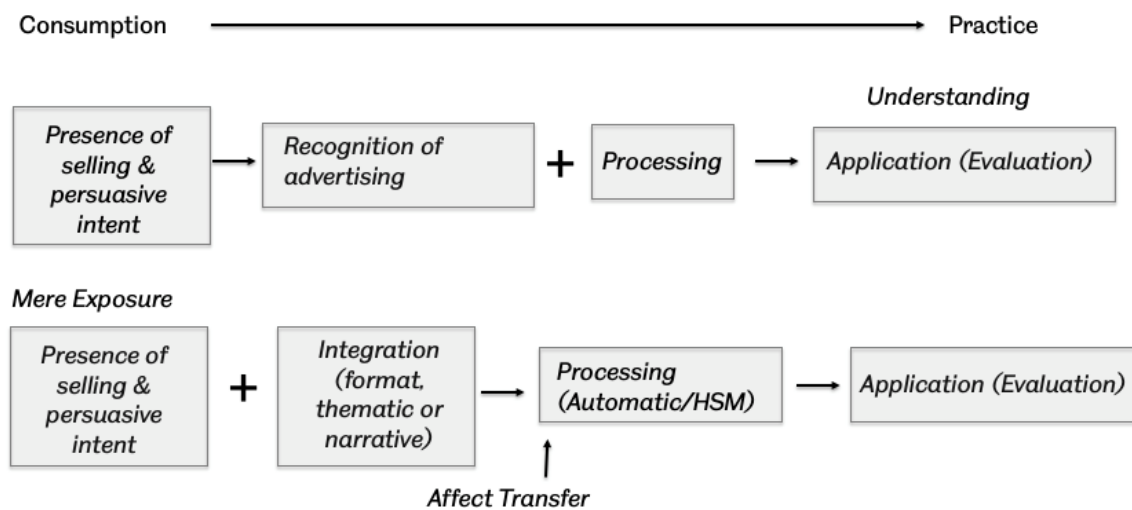
The concept of evaluation is theoretically significant because it contributes to the long-standing debate surrounding the question of what the true function of advertising literacy is. One of the most wide-spread assumptions regarding the concept of advertising literacy is that the possession and application of advertising knowledge provides a cognitive defence that reduces a person's susceptibility to undesirable advertising effects (Rozendaal et al., 2011).

However, in contrast to the cognitive defence perspective, the 'Layers of Literacy' Framework introduced here offers an explanation as to why consumers are still persuaded by commercially-motivated material and content, even when they are able to recognise, process and understand the underlying commercial intent. In other words, this framework acknowledges that even if a person is consciously aware that they are being advertised to, it does not necessarily mean that they will respond with a negative attitude towards the advertised commodity or that their intention to purchase it will be reduced. As discussed in Subsection 5.3.3, this counter argument is rarely explored in advertising literacy research. In that respect, the Layers of Literacy Framework is intended to provide researchers with a more 'neutral' conceptualisation of advertising literacy, which incorporates theoretical concepts from both marketing and sociology as discussed throughout all of the Chapters of this thesis.

The layers are also deliberately organised in terms of the level of sophistication related to each type of knowledge based upon existing definitions of literacy as incorporating both simple and more abstract forms of knowledge and that true understanding is demonstrated by the accurate application of conceptual knowledge. In other words, true advertising literacy is demonstrated when "children appreciate the use of advertising techniques, strategies, and

production values”, which represent the common hallmarks of commercially-motivated persuasion attempts (Lawlor and Prothero, 2008, p1206). Not only do the findings of this PhD research provide clear support for this argument, they also support Nelson’s (2016, p171) proposition that there is real value to be gained from offering children the opportunity to create their own advertising materials, which gives a better indication of their level of understanding compared to cognitive or recognition-based questions only.

Figure 5.2 Advertising Literacy as a Practice



(Source: Author’s own work).

5.3.5 How Existing Theory has been Incorporated into the Framework

In terms of its underlying theory, this framework builds upon the reasoning of format, thematic and narrative integration (as shown in Figure 5.2) introduced in the PCMC model (Buijzen et al., 2010). Like the PCMC Model (Buijzen et al., 2010) the Layers of Literacy framework transcends media format and can be applied in research into both offline and online advertising.

This framework also builds upon the original Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) as proposed by Friestad and Wright (1994), by adopting their perspective that researchers should not assume that exposure to commercial persuasion attempts will always have a negative impact on consumers. This PhD research has shown that ideally, consideration should also be given to:

1. the context within which the persuasive attempt takes place

2. the use of credible marketing tactics to communicate the key message or call to action (Jones and Glynn, 2017)
3. the way that the brand or product is presented
4. the personal appeal of the source of the persuasive attempt (as perceived by the consumer)

The Layers of Literacy Framework also incorporates ideas from the OBC Literacy framework (Lawlor et al., 2016). For example, it posits that where possible, children's advertising literacy researchers should also pay attention to a child's personal preferences, their marketplace experience, and the ways in which they express their individual and group identities through their material choices and conspicuous alignment with certain products and brands. The framework also complements the OBC Literacy framework (Lawlor et al., 2016) by drawing attention to socio-contextual elements of children's everyday lives and their interactions within virtual environments where there is an increasing commercial presence, by reinforcing the importance of identifying the nature of brands' attempts to reach out and build relationships with young consumers online.

In terms of its similarities with the conceptual framework developed by Hudders et al., (2017), the Layers of Literacy framework also considers cognitive, attitudinal and moral dimensions of advertising literacy. As noted earlier (Section 2.2.2.6), one of the strengths of the framework proposed by Hudders et al., (2017) is that it considers the actual retrieval of conceptual knowledge in the context within which persuasion takes place (i.e. Embedded advertising exposure) and the application of such knowledge in situ (Sweeney, Lawlor and Brady, 2021). Similarly, the Layers of Literacy framework positions the enactment of children's advertising literacy in practice as an evaluative, sensemaking process, based on the concepts of Situational advertising literacy (Hudders et al., 2017) and advertising literacy performance (Rozendaal et al., 2011). However, the main difference between the two frameworks relates to the level of complexity in the way these dimensions are defined. For example, in terms of attitudinal dimensions, the framework proposed by Hudders et al., (2017) also takes into account 'Attitude towards the ad' and 'Advertising Effects' (as shown in Figure 2.1) to counterbalance the automatic affective reactions evoked by the fun and entertaining character of contemporary advertising formats.

However, this thesis highlights some potential flaws in the underlying reasoning used by Hudders et al., (2017) to develop the concept of Situational advertising literacy. For example,

Hudders et al., (2017, p335) acknowledge that “the general attitude toward advertising... is more of an overall evaluation of persuasive and commercial content and is not based on the situational exposure to one specific persuasive message and the brand it promotes or the tactic it uses”. This means that it is entirely possible for children to hold a general dislike of advertising but still exhibit a positive response to certain types of embedded advertising at the time of exposure and that this may still trigger a critical evaluation of the persuasive element (Hudders et al., 2017). Hence, whilst the findings of this PhD research support the dimension of ‘attitudinal advertising literacy’ (Rozendaal et al., 2011) as evaluative in nature, it also suggests that in addition to broadening the scope of attitudinal dimensions to include positive and neutral attitudes towards advertising in general, existing attitudinal dimensions of advertising literacy could be further enhanced by incorporating positive attitudes towards brands and products as well.

This is based on the specific findings of this PhD research which indicate:

1. liking of a featured brand or product is associated with liking of the advertisement
2. liking of the source/spokesperson is associated with liking of the advertisement
3. the entertainment value of the advertisement (regardless of product category or brand relevance) is associated with liking of the advertisement
4. children’s attitudes towards advertisements can stem from prior experience with the featured product or brand

Hence, these findings are significant because they suggest that children’s attitudes towards certain advertising *characteristics* are particularly influential on the way that advertisements are interpreted. These insights contribute to our understanding of where positive attitudes come from, how they are reinforced and the role they play in enacting “critical responses”.

According to Hudders et al., (2017, p335) critical responses consist of asking questions such as “What persuasive strategies have been used?” and “What impact does this specific strategy have on me?” and “Is this specific strategy appropriate to use?”. Whereas, in this PhD research the questions asked were shown to be much more specific for example in terms of product i.e. “Will I use it?” and “Is it worth it?” (Section 4.4.7).

Furthermore, Hudders et al., 2017, p334) argue that children are less inclined to evaluate embedded advertising using heuristics because of the fun and engaging nature of the format. However, this was not found to be the case here, where children were still able to demonstrate a process of evaluation, even to the extent of understanding underlying commercial intent of entertaining and immersive formats in the absence of recognition.

As noted in section 2.2.1.9 in Chapter 2, research incorporating advertising literacy as a multidimensional concept has increased and a growing number of scholars support the notion that it is important to consider advertising literacy in an attitudinal sense. Although on reflection of the literature, it is apparent that there is a focus on studying consumers' awareness and understanding of the purpose of advertising and the links with negative attitudes that still dominates advertising literacy research with both adults and children and across advertising formats.

Indeed, the findings from this PhD research demonstrate that participants shared a perception of advertising as annoying and intrusive (see Section 4.2.6.1). Nevertheless, progress in this domain has perhaps been somewhat restricted by this perspective. For example, the opposite attitude "liking of advertising" is also clearly evidenced in these findings. This lends support for the suggestion that attitudinal dimensions of advertising literacy ought to be expanded to include positive attitudes. Due to the nature of this PhD research, it is not possible and perhaps not necessary to argue that a positive attitude towards advertising is more or less important when conceptualising advertising literacy. Positive attitudes towards the practice of advertising in general as well as its characteristics are certainly less well documented in prior research (Hudders et al., 2017) but that is likely to be a result of a steady stream of research over the last three decades which has inevitably been shaped by, and has reinforced the concept of advertising literacy as a cognitive defence against unwanted advertising effects.

There was also evidence in the data of neutral attitudes towards advertising, which again are often overlooked in children's advertising research, despite the fact that they form part of historical conceptualisations upon which many new studies are based, such as the original Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright, 1994).

As emphasised earlier (Section 2.6), this thesis supports the argument that conceptualisations of advertising literacy should also consider the context of persuasion, including the dynamic nature of the contemporary media environment and the implications this has for the retrieval of advertising knowledge and the actual application of advertising literacy in situ. Therefore, it is beneficial to consider the nature of the contemporary media environment in all advertising literacy research, not just in the context of children. However, in light of the concerns surrounding the negative effects of advertising on children that have been raised by

multiple researchers, policy makers and practitioners over the last four decades, it is important to work towards a conceptualisation of advertising literacy that acknowledges how sophisticated the science of advertising has become as a result of digitalisation, whilst also acknowledging the significant impact this has had on children's everyday lives.

5.4 Reflections on Common Assumptions of Children’s Advertising Literacy Theory

In terms of children’s advertising literacy theory, there are several insights highlighted by the findings of this research that warrant further discussion. These are considered in more depth in the following Subsections 5.4.1 - 5.4.3.

5.4.1 Assumption One: Advertising Literacy and Persuasion Knowledge are the same thing

First, as highlighted in the literature review in Section 2.2.2.4, it is evident that the field of children’s advertising literacy research has become conceptually and theoretically fragmented over time (Young, 1990; Kunkel, 2010; Boerman et al., 2018). On the one hand, this fragmentation is likely to be the result of the perpetual race amongst academics to keep pace with marketing practitioners in light of the relentless technological developments that have dramatically altered the marketing landscape (Buijzen et al., 2010; Kotler et al., 2017; Lampert et al., 2021; Hackley and Hackley, 2022). On the other hand, it is also likely to be a reflection of the various epistemological and ontological assumptions held by researchers who work within the field (Boerman et al., 2018). Inevitably, this fragmentation has made it difficult for researchers to reach a consensus on the nature of children’s advertising literacy (Moses and Baldwin, 2005; Kunkel, 2010; Malmelin, 2010; Zarouali et al., 2020). Historically, advertising literacy has been used interchangeably with persuasion knowledge by researchers (Kunkel, 2001; Nelson, 2018) with disagreement continuing to surround its definition and whether it should be conceptualised as a form of knowledge (Hudders et al., 2017), a set of skills (Boush, Freistad and Rose, 1994; Rozendaal, Buijzen and Oprea 2016), a cognitive defence against advertising effects (Robertson and Rossiter, 1974; Rozendaal et al., 2011; Andrews, Walker and Keys, 2019) or as a concept that combines all three of these aspects in some way (Zarouali et al., 2020).

Despite the lack of consensus, the majority of advertising literacy researchers, past and present, do appear to agree upon the idea that children need to recognise both the underlying selling and persuasive intent of commercial material in order to comprehend that it is a form of advertising (Young, 1990; Waiguny, Nelson and Terlutter 2014; Hudders et al., 2017b, Zarouali et al., 2020). Indeed, the findings from this PhD research also support this assertion by suggesting that there does need to be some kind of recognition of commercial intent, be that the advertiser’s intention to sell and/or to persuade, in order for children to identify

something as an advertisement. However, in contrast to this assumption, these findings have also indicated that the ability to identify something as an advertisement is perhaps just one element of a person's overall advertising literacy. When it comes to the application of literacy, it is also important to consider the process of interpretation, and understand that recognition of the underlying commercial intent of an advertisement is not the only factor that may influence the way that it is interpreted or understood by children as has been argued previously by Wright, Friestad and Boush, (2005) and Moses and Baldwin, (2005).

What is interesting is that these findings diverge from previous research in that it does not always appear to be the case that this recognition of commercial intent, however it is activated, automatically results in a dislike of advertising or a sceptical attitude towards the claims made in the persuasion attempt as has been suggested previously (Rozendaal et al., 2011b; Rozendaal et al., 2016). The most common conceptualisations of children's advertising literacy maintain that as a skill or ability, its purpose is to activate a critical attitude towards advertising (Moses and Baldwin, 2005; Livingstone and Helsper, 2006). However, this conceptualisation does not account for a) the recognisable forms of advertising that are positively received by an audience and b) the embedded forms of advertising that are unrecognisable but are ultimately still persuasive (Lawlor et al., 2016; Hudders et al., 2017).

To elaborate on this point, it is useful to restate the differences between the concepts of advertising literacy and persuasion knowledge as they are generally presented in the literature (Section 2.2, Chapter 2). The main difference being that as concepts, advertising literacy is somewhat reductive and persuasion knowledge is much more broad ranging. In the interests of avoiding repetition of the literature review, in simple terms, advertising literacy theory explains the recognition and processing of commercially-persuasive attempts (Rozendaal et al., 2011) whereas persuasion knowledge theory explains how a person's persuasion knowledge (which can be enhanced by experience of persuasion in multiple, non-commercial contexts) is used to "interpret and cope with marketers' sales presentations" (Friestad and Wright, 1994, p1).

On reflection, the differences in definition appear to stem from the way these concepts have been operationalised by researchers. In simple terms, advertising literacy tends to be used in research that aims to address the negative effects of advertising on consumers, particularly those that adopt a quantitative design to measure the cause and consequence of such effects (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2000). Whereas, the concept of Persuasion Knowledge is typically

applied by researchers in a more neutral way, to explain the ways in which commercialised persuasion can be interpreted by consumers (Boerman et al., 2018).

In reality, the concepts of advertising literacy and persuasion knowledge are complex, yet both concepts are considered to be relevant here in helping to explain the findings of this PhD research. The concept of Persuasion Knowledge (Friestad and Wright, 1994) is relevant because it explains how this knowledge enables people to deconstruct commercial messages, recognise particular features of advertisements and also anticipate the effect it may have on them. In other words, how this knowledge is applied in practice, to evaluate an advertisement. This is useful here because it offers an explanation as to how children can make sense of commercialised material, in the absence of any recognition of commercial intent. This is important given the increasing prevalence of embedded marketing as mentioned earlier. In today's digital society, advertising and commercial persuasion does not exist as a one-way, didactic form of communication between organisations and consumers (Hackley and Hackley, 2022). What is clear from the exploration of socio-contextual aspects of children's consumption and the links with advertising literacy throughout this PhD, is that children's behaviour as competent consumers and their purchase decisions can actually be quite complex in practice. This framework is supported by the findings of this research, which suggest that children's interpretations of advertising are ultimately dependent upon the context of consumption as opposed to just the child's chronological age and their assumed cognitive abilities. Thus demonstrating the importance of looking at media formats in context as opposed to isolation.

These findings support all of the dimensions of persuasion knowledge identified by Boerman, van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal and Dima (2018, p671) in the Persuasion Knowledge Scale for Sponsored Content (PKS-SC). Even though this scale was developed for adults, these PhD findings provide support for its relevance in future advertising literacy studies with children. For ease of reference, the dimensions of the PKS-SC Scale are reproduced in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3 Components of the Persuasion Knowledge Scale for Sponsored Content (PKS-SC) supported by this PhD research

Component	PKS-SC (Boerman et al., 2018)	Evidenced in this research
1	recognition of sponsored content	Yes
2	understanding of selling and persuasive intent	Yes
3	recognition of the commercial source of sponsored content,	Yes
4	understanding of persuasive tactics	Yes
5	understanding of the economic model	Yes
6	self-reflective awareness of the effectiveness of sponsored content	Yes
7	scepticism toward sponsored content	Yes
8	appropriateness of sponsored content	Yes
9	liking of sponsored content	Yes

(Source: Boerman et al., 2018).

What is also interesting from a theoretical perspective is that the findings of this PhD research actually lend support to some of the more historical explanations of children’s understanding of advertising, which have been overlooked in contemporary research. For example, 50 years ago Robertson and Rossiter (1974) identified that the symbolic nature of products and personal prior experience both play an important role in children’s overall understanding of advertising. Admittedly, Robertson and Rossiter’s (1974) research was conducted in a somewhat simpler media environment, only focusing on television advertising as it existed in its limited state in the 1970s, yet scholars must not ignore suggestions that outcomes of advertising exposure may be influenced by many factors beyond a child’s age or level of conceptual knowledge of advertising (Moses and Baldwin, 2005; Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008; Lapierre, 2019).

This PhD research lends support for the argument idea that more research would be beneficial on the application of advertising literacy. For instance, even if children possess a high level of conceptual advertising knowledge, they may not always use – or apply - this knowledge when exposed to an advertising attempt (Hudders et al., 2017). The literature offers several potential explanations for why this might be the case. Moses and Baldwin (2005) refer to this as a “competence-performance” gap, meaning that even if children are

technically capable of applying their conceptual advertising knowledge (i.e. a basic requirement of advertising literacy), they may not always do so in practice. As Hudders et al., (2017b, p336) assert, advertising literacy depends on both “the development of cognitive and social abilities” and the socialisation experience of the child (John, 1999). Indeed, the consumer socialisation process often results in the development of more mature interests, more refined product/brand preferences and more discerning attitudes towards the way that goods and commodities are marketed in the contemporary media environment (Ward, 1974; John, 1999). Therefore, this thesis supports the argument that it is too reductive to study children’s advertising literacy without also considering the social aspects of children’s consumption (Cook, 2008; Sparrman et al., 2009) and how this relates to their interpretation of commercially-motivated material (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008; De Jans et al., 2017; Hudders et al., 2017; Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, 2018; Xiao et al., 2018).

5.4.2 Assumption Two - Children’s Advertising Literacy is Less Sophisticated than Adults

Second, there are issues with the long-standing argument that adults are more commercially aware than children, simply because they are older and therefore, they are less susceptible to unwanted advertising effects (Kunkel et al., 2004). This issue relates to the dominant conceptualisations of literacy as an emergent ability that reaches full accomplishment or an adult-like competency at age 12 (John, 1999) regardless of other factors (Zarouali et al., 2019). As it was indicated earlier in Section 2.3, some scholars have expressed their dissatisfaction with the consumer socialisation paradigm as the basis for children’s consumption research because of its roots in cognitive psychology (Cook, 2004b, Sparrman et al., 2012).

Despite this, John’s (1999) ‘ages and stages’ framework has been applied in a substantial volume of work. It is still used as a common theoretical basis within children’s marketing research with children. However, it is not unreasonable to assume that children’s marketing practice has moved on somewhat from when this research was published 25 years ago. As it has also been reiterated throughout this thesis, since John’s framework was introduced in 1999, there has been a global shift from one-way, didactic forms of commercialisation towards a much more cyclical consumer-centric approach to marketing (Kotler et al., 2017). In addition, children’s lifestyles have also changed over the last two decades, therefore this model might benefit from being revisited and updated by advertising literacy scholars.

Furthermore, current conceptualisations of advertising literacy including those based on John's (1999) framework do not adequately incorporate a true consumer socialisation perspective. That is that they do not seek to empower children and may actually perpetuate the teleological belief that children are less-than-complete, inferior consumers when compared to adults simply because of their age and cognitive abilities (Corsaro, 1992; Cook, 2004b). It is important to emphasise that this thesis does not seek to present a clear-cut disagreement with the assumption that adults are - on the balance of probability - more 'accomplished' consumers than children in general. Undeniably, adults typically have access to more resources that can expedite consumption compared to children, such as independence over their own finances, unrestricted usage of technology and access to own transport (Gunter, Oates and Blades, 2005). Additionally, this thesis does not seek to categorically dispute the logic that most people are, on the balance of probability, likely to become more sophisticated consumers as they gain more experience within the marketplace (Ward, 1974; Friestad and Wright, 1994; John, 1999; Moses and Baldwin, 2005).

However, what this thesis *does* argue in favour of is the view that children should not be seen as unsophisticated consumers simply because of their age (Cook, 2008; Buckingham and Tingstad, 2014). If researchers adopt such a narrow view of children's agency, and assume it is universal to all children of the same age (Cook, 2004), then it is difficult to position them as consumers in their own right, that is as consumers with different needs, changing preferences, and divergent challenges (Sparrman and Aarsand, 2009). Hence, advertising literacy researchers should take care not to automatically assume that greater marketplace experience is a by-product of "growing up" (Wyness, 2006, p117).

If children's advertising literacy theory is to be understood as a multidimensional concept beyond the cognitive dimensions (i.e. possession of conceptual advertising knowledge) and include attitudinal and moral dimensions (Rozendaal et al., 2011; Hudders et al., 2017; Sweeney et al., 2021; Castonguay and Messina, 2022b) then perhaps there is also value to be gained from considering children's unique interpretations of advertising based on the social elements of their lives and also exploring how this knowledge is actually applied in practice as is argued in this PhD research.

Advertising literacy researchers should acknowledge that children's experiences of childhood differ greatly, even between children who reside within the same geographical area (James, Jenks and Prout, 1999). It is not unreasonable to argue that some children may have had lots of experience within the physical and virtual marketplace by the time they reach adolescence, and that other children of the same age may have had much less (Buckingham and Tingstad, 2014).

Disparity exists amongst today's children in many areas, not just in terms of their attitudes to money, access to technology and levels of materialism as a result of the diversity in socio-economic groups and family set-ups in contemporary society (Livingstone, Mascheroni and Stoliova, 2021). It is plausible to suggest that these factors may all play a role in the way children interpret and respond to advertising in all its forms, regardless of their chronological age at the time of exposure. To summarise, where previous research has involved children, many of these studies use age as the main factor in determining and measuring children's advertising literacy competence, regardless of the media format, content or context under investigation (Lampert et al., 2021).

These findings emphasise that it is also important to pay attention to the characteristics of advertising in more detail and the ways in which children interpret these, offering an explanation as to how children may still make sense of embedded advertising formats in the absence of cognitive recognition. These enhance existing advertising literacy theory in terms of attitudinal and moral dimensions, positive attitudes towards advertising - especially if it is not recognised as such extending the evaluative component by indicating that children can use certain recognisable, conspicuous features of contemporary advertising to help them identify the underlying commercial intent.

5.4.3 Assumption Three: Advertising Literacy Provides a Defence Against Unwanted Advertising Effects

Third, there is an issue with conceptualising advertising literacy as a cognitive defence that serves to reduce one's susceptibility to the persuasive nature of advertising because it does not provide a robust explanation as to why advertising is still persuasive for adults and children alike, even in instances when there is clear recognition of being directly targeted and the underlying commercial intent of the persuasion attempt (Buijzen et al., 2010; Rozendaal

et al., 2011). Evidence has repeatedly suggested that recognition of commercial intent may not always result in a negative attitude towards the advertisement, the featured brand or the product on offer (Livingstone and Helpser, 2006; Rozendaal et al., 2011b; van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2012; Rozendaal et al., 2013). Nor does recognition of advertising always result in a measurable reduction in purchase intention (Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005; Panic et al., 2013; De Pauw et al., 2017). However, there remains a preoccupation with the negative outcomes of advertising exposure amongst researchers. There are issues with focusing solely on persuasive and selling intent and the argument that recognisable advertisements are more likely to dissuade consumers from purchasing. There are issues with looking at advertising formats in isolation, as opposed to in context, there are issues with not appreciating advertising as a multi-faceted practice and the social aspects of consumption. There are issues with focusing on general attitudes to advertising instead of attitudes to characteristics, and the impact of these, as well as basing advertising policy on blanket theories of advertising literacy relating to ages and stages of cognitive development. It is not sufficient to study children's advertising literacy without also considering children's consumption. Specifically, the social aspects of children's consumption, as emphasised in this thesis. The main issue is that context has often been overlooked in children's advertising literacy research, therefore, it is not sufficient to ignore the potential impact of the environment on knowledge and understanding.

As noted in Section 2.2, despite becoming more complex in recent years, a core element of advertising literacy theory is the 'disliking of advertising' in general. Indeed, this research has also shown that when children possess an appreciation of how 'advertising' works and why it exists, they typically perceive it as an annoying, intrusive, and unavoidable part of everyday life. However, this is just one possible explanation for why children ignore, dismiss or dislike particular advertisements.

This thesis argues that the opposite attitude; 'liking of advertising' is equally worthy of attention by advertising literacy researchers. Creative advertisements that capture the audiences' attention and evoke strong emotional reactions tend to be more memorable (regardless of product, service or brand). Advertisements that are creative and entertaining are more memorable, which leads to the formation of positive associations in consumers' minds. The manifestation of a 'critical response' to advertisements should not always equate to a negative attitude towards advertising in general. With that in mind, should Similar

reasoning underpins the conceptualisation of Situational and Dispositional advertising literacy (Hudders et al., 2017), with the suggestion that children's pre-existing attitudes towards brands and products should also be considered in advertising literacy studies.

However, perhaps it is unrealistic to assume that children hold a positive view of advertising as a practice in general. Despite this, However, Hudders et al., (2017) do not consider this relevant to the attitudinal advertising literacy. On reflection, the findings from this PhD research, provide evidence to support the inclusion of children's attitudes towards brands and products in conceptualisations of advertising literacy to suit the contemporary media environment.

The insights from this research and its resultant conceptual framework (see Figure 5.1) offer an enhancement to existing theory and further support for the argument that researchers must acknowledge how children learn to be consumers, as well as their preferences and sensibilities in order to better understand the concept of advertising literacy. This research demonstrates the value in adopting an interdisciplinary, socio-contextual approach to the study of children's advertising literacy. It emphasises the important relationships between children's social and virtual relationships and their interpretation of different advertising formats, characteristics and contexts (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008; Rozendaal, Lapierre, van Reijmersdal and Buijzen, 2011; De Pauw et al., 2019; Hains and Jennings, 2021).

Through its exploration of children's own perspectives, this thesis begins to address the lack of holistic research (Section 2.5.2) and the gaps relating to contemporary advertising formats (Section 2.5.1). It sheds light on the enactment of advertising literacy in practice (Section 2.5.3).

5.5 Methodological Contributions from this PhD Research

5.5.1 Introduction

In addition to the theoretical contributions discussed so far, this PhD thesis also introduces an innovative research design, which is based on both the researcher's professional research experience and personal belief that using creative, participatory tasks activities as data collection tools facilitates a more engaging and 'child-friendly' process than less interactive, more formal research methods. Specifically, this section of the Chapter seeks to draw attention to the methodological contributions of this PhD research, by discussing the benefits and the challenges of using the creative workshop method in research with children.

As emphasised earlier in Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis, despite the popularity and widespread use of the creative workshop as a research method within the marketing industry (The Market Researchers, 2023), it still appears to be a relatively rare technique within academic marketing research (Daems et al., 2017). Therefore, it is understandable that some scholars may consider it a risky strategy to design a PhD research project around an uncommon method. However, in this case, the researcher holds the opposite view.

It is true that there is a noticeable lack of literature within the marketing discipline on the use of creative workshops in research studies (Vaart, Hoven and Huigen, 2018).

Despite this, the researcher felt confident that she could draw upon her professional social marketing experience. Hence, rather than opting to play it safe by choosing to use a more common qualitative method such as focus groups or participant observations (Saunders et al., 2020), the researcher felt that there was a real opportunity to explore the use of this method in an academic setting as well as the potential to contribute to qualitative research methods literature. It is the researcher's view that the inclusion of interactive activities helps to make the overall research process more fun and engaging for children. Presenting young participants with a choice of creative tasks that stimulate their imagination is more likely to elicit thoughtful and insightful responses to a researcher's questions, and it allows them the freedom to choose the most suitable means to express their views (Vaart et al., 2018).

5.5.2 How this Thesis Contributes to Research Methods Literature

This thesis offers several contributions to the existing research methods literature, which are explained in more detail in the following Subsections; 5.5.2 - 5.5.3 of this Chapter.

The value of these contributions is enhanced by the fact that they have a wide range of appeal and application, in that they can serve as a reference point for any researcher, regardless of their discipline, who may be interested in adopting the creative workshop method in their research projects.

5.5.2.1 Restating the Case for Using Creative Research Methods with Children

As also outlined previously in Chapter 3 of this thesis, sociology is traditionally a more philosophical and theory-driven discipline than marketing (Besbris and Khan, 2017), which tends to emphasise the importance of empirically-driven research in advancing the discipline (Kumar et al., 2015). Recent evidence supports this view by confirming that it is indeed empirical papers, especially those that are based on the results of quantitative research studies that dominate the marketing and advertising literacy literature. Furthermore, this includes the significant number of studies in this area (n=229) that have been conducted with children and young people over the last 40 years (Sigirci et al., 2022, p1602). Despite the evidence of this dominance, and an appreciation that quantitative studies are statistically more likely than qualitative studies to be accepted for publication in the most prestigious marketing journals (Crick, 2018), the researcher chose to follow a purely qualitative approach to data collection and analysis in this PhD research. Again, as previously explained in Chapter 3, this decision was predominantly based on the strength of the arguments in favour of using qualitative methods made by scholars from both fields of marketing and sociology. In order to avoid unnecessary repetition of the methodology Chapter, only the main points of these arguments are reiterated here.

In terms of epistemology and ontology, qualitative methods are considered to be particularly appropriate in exploratory research (Kapoulas and Mitic, 2012) and well aligned with interpretivism as an overarching research philosophy (Bhattacharjee, 2022). In addition, qualitative research, with its capacity to capture the richness of children's own views on topics that are relevant to them (Kleine, Pearson and Proveda, 2016) has been shown to be

especially effective when used in both marketing studies (O’Sullivan, 2005; Warren, 2000) and sociological studies that involve young participants (Schor, 2005; Sparrman et al., 2012). Furthermore, the inherent flexibility of qualitative methods gives researchers the freedom to design and adapt their studies as necessary based on what is in the best interests of their participants (Seballos and Tanner, 2009), which is considered to be one of the most important ethical considerations in any research project that involves children (Nairn, 2012). This flexibility is also beneficial to the progress of the project itself, which influenced the decision to adopt an iterative approach to this PhD research. This meant that key concepts and ideas that emerged during the first phase of data collection could be validated and sense checked by participants in the second phase of the research, enhancing the validity and reliability of the overall findings that are presented in this thesis. What is important here is that research is evaluated within the context of the overall approach and not judged on inappropriate criteria (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) a point that is returned to in more depth in the following Conclusions Chapter.

5.5.2.2 Using Creative and Participatory Research Methods

As mentioned previously in Chapter 3, very few studies have adopted a creative workshop as a research method to explore advertising literacy with children to date (De Pauw et al., 2017). Therefore, the researcher wanted to seize the opportunity to apply this underutilised method in this PhD study. This is considered a strength based on the arguments previously introduced in Chapter 3. The first being that advertising literacy needs more than the cognitive skills required to recognise selling and persuasive intent and that true literacy develops when “children appreciate the use of advertising techniques, strategies, and production values”, which represent the common hallmarks of commercially-motivated persuasion attempts (Lawlor and Prothero, 2008, p1206). Not only do the findings of this research provide clear support for this argument, the conversations prompted by the two activities in the creative workshops that required children to think like marketers (i.e. the YouTube storyboarding exercise and packaging design task) also support Nelson’s (2016, p171) proposition that there is real value to be gained from offering children the opportunity to create their own advertising materials, “within the scope of their everyday lives” because this gives a better indication of their level of understanding compared to cognitive or recognition-based questions only.

Whilst this is considered to offer a valuable theoretical contribution to the marketing research literature, it also indicates the potential benefits of applying this specific technique in other areas of research. The significance of such findings is that they reinforce the notion that ‘understanding’ as an intangible concept, which can be evidenced through the application of existing knowledge to a specific task, situation or problem regardless of the topic under exploration. In that respect, the possibilities for adaptation of this methodology across the social sciences are considered to be particularly promising. Furthermore, this type of approach to data collection circumvents the issue of children believing that there are correct and incorrect answers to a researcher’s questions and again helps to maintain a more equal dynamic between researcher and participant, which is important when ensuring that research is conducted ethically. Participatory approaches allow children to ‘take part’ at a basic level but also enable them to become co-constructors of new knowledge and meaning at a deeper level (Kleine et al., 2016). Generally speaking, the principles of participatory research are grounded in ethical best practice (Seballos and Tanner, 2009) and a summary of how these were applied in this PhD project is reproduced below for ease of reference in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4 Incorporation of Participatory Research principles into PhD research design

Principle of participatory research	Applied in this PhD
Relevance: the subject of the research relates to children’s priorities and is facilitated in a way that allows them to relate to the topic and find it meaningful	Creation of child-friendly research methods that match classroom activities Allow participants to suggest topics of interest
Creativity: creative methods keep children motivated and help them to communicate freely	Creation of child-friendly research methods and relaxed, informal group setting Give participants the choice of activity that best suits their interests
Participation: by being given the opportunity to give feedback on the approaches used and the knowledge generated, children can influence and co-shape the research and feel empowerment and ownership of the findings	Using interactive activities Using follow up interviews with children from the workshops Assigning children an “expert role” - explaining that they are the expert on their own media use, and explaining that the purpose of the interview is to better understand what the children already know. Explain to the children the understanding gained from the interview, and

	ask them if it's right or if they wish to correct or add anything.
Flexibility: research processes must remain open and responsive	<p>Pilot test materials and make amendments (i.e. removing questions that don't work or are too difficult to answer)</p> <p>Provide laminated cards for children who are less confident in their writing abilities for certain creative workshop tasks</p> <p>Be prepared to amend the order of questions and creative tasks depending on the nature of the participants</p>
Empowerment: research processes should allow space for children to reflect on their new knowledge and understanding, preferably within peer groups, as well as build their confidence in their ability to act and voice their views	<p>Use of peer group interviews</p> <p>Use of children's own language, glossary and expressions in verbal summaries.</p> <p>Pay careful attention to the dynamics of the situation, including such practicalities as making sure to sit at the same height as the children or on the floor during group tasks</p>

(Source: Seballos and Tanner, 2009; Kleine et al., 2016).

As also highlighted earlier on in this thesis in Chapter 3, it is encouraging to note that there appears to be a clear trend within the social sciences towards the use of creative and participatory approaches in research with children (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015). From a wider perspective, there is also a significant and growing interest in these methods amongst scholars from a wide range of specialities, not just those working with children and young people. For example, these approaches are beginning to attract attention from researchers who work with vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups and communities in the public sector, as well as those who sit outside of academia, such as researchers who work within the third sector, charitable and not-for-profit organisations, and social enterprises (Harting, Kruithof, Ruijter and Stronks, 2022).

This interest is potentially a result of a growing number of studies that have demonstrated the successful application of these methods thus raising awareness of the existence of participatory approaches. What is interesting however, is that the main theme within this body of evidence almost always relates to the potential advantages or mutual benefits of involving participants *in* research projects from both an ethical (Pahl and Allen, 2011) and/or

hypothetical stance (Franks, 2009). On the one hand, whilst this work is undeniably valuable in raising the profile of these methods, there remains a distinct lack of evidence-based guidance and practical advice on how to actually *do* creative research methods in practice. This is an important issue because even though it is possible to find multiple examples of techniques and participatory case studies, it is perhaps difficult for inexperienced researchers to know where to actually begin with a creative research project, especially without undertaking additional training courses, which are typically offered by external practitioners rather than within academic institutions at present.

As such, the first methodological contribution of this PhD research is based on its proposal of the research creative workshop as a viable alternative to the traditional focus group method in qualitative research studies. This proposition is supported by the discussion in the following Subsection based on the application in this PhD project. Section 6.5 in the following Chapter; Conclusions explains the second approach to developing and adapting creative tasks based on the principles of Design Thinking (as introduced in Chapter 3). This section explains how to turn practical activities into efficient research tools that can be used in a workshop setting. Both Sections (5.5.2.3 and 6.5) aim to demystify how these approaches can work in practice by explaining the steps involved to offer guidance to interested yet perhaps inexperienced researchers.

The first approach explains the value in adopting an inquiry-based pedagogical perspective to creative research projects that specifically involve children and young people.

The second approach explains the similarities between the social research process and the problem-solving perspective to innovation based on the principles of design thinking, which can be used to develop tasks-as-research tools for participants of all ages.

As always, in the interests of reflexivity (Brady and Graham, 2020), in addition to demonstrating the potential of the creative workshop for use in future research studies, this section also incorporates a critical discussion of some of the main challenges that are involved in adopting this method and how researchers can overcome them.

5.5.2.3 Using an Inquiry-Based Pedagogical Approach in Research with Children

As explained in Chapter 3, one of the ways that researchers can develop creative activities that can be used as research tools is by adopting an inquiry-based pedagogical perspective

(Bruce and Bishop, 2002; Harwood, 2010). At the centre of this perspective are four fundamental principles of the primary education system in the UK. These include 1) an emphasis on learning through play (Marsh et al., 2018), 2) the development of gross and fine motor skills (De Bruijn, Mombarg and Timmermans (2022), 3) engagement in physical activity (De Bruijn et al., 2022) and 4) the importance of healthy personal and social development in childhood (Dowling, 2000). With its roots in early years and childhood research, this perspective is particularly suitable for use in research projects that involve children and young people.

It is helpful to consider these principles when designing activities as they can ensure that any potential research tool, instrument or activity is representative of the typical nature of activities that school-age children are involved in or have had some experience with in their everyday lives. When it comes to the development of interactive activities that can be adapted into research tools, incorporating these principles is useful for several reasons. First of all, from a purely logistical viewpoint, the less time it takes a researcher to introduce and explain the instructions for an activity to participants, the better. This is because the time available for conducting fieldwork with children is typically less than that which is allocated to research studies involving adult participants.

As also emphasised earlier in Chapter 3, it is understandable that many research projects with children take place within organisations such as schools, charities or youth clubs. However, it is often incredibly difficult to recruit children and young people to take part in research because these institutions usually have gatekeepers, who typically hold the power to grant a researcher access to young participants. Unfortunately, access to participants is sometimes blocked by gatekeepers who refuse researchers' requests on the basis of misplaced patriarchal concerns for those in their care (Kubler-Ross, 1969). This is perhaps indicative of the socially-constructed belief that childhood itself is a precious and sacred time (Cook, 2004a) and that children require special protections to preserve their innocence and well-being (Cook, 2008). In the researcher's own experience, it is also likely to be a result of the lasting impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and young people.

To put this into context, the researcher enrolled on the PhD programme in 2019, 6 months before the global spread of the Covid-19 virus forced the UK and the rest of the world into a period of lockdown, social distancing and heightened anxiety. One of the most significant

impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic was the interruption to children's education as a result of the UK government's decision to close schools to the majority of pupils. Understandably, this was a major setback for the majority of postgraduate researchers regardless of the stage they were at in their PhD journey, not just for those who had always planned to conduct their fieldwork within a school environment. During this period, there was prolonged uncertainty over if, and when schools would reopen to pupils and whether 'normal' life (as it was pre-Covid) would ever resume. The University of Sheffield also introduced restrictions on all face-to-face research activities indefinitely. Unfortunately, this meant that the researcher had to consider a number of alternatives to the original data collection plan, such as switching to online methods, online surveys and paper questionnaires, all of which would have been extremely problematic given that the researcher had not secured participation from a single primary school at this point and had very limited access to potential participants.

However, it is useful to refer to them here because it helps to explain why so many of the schools that were approached did not even acknowledge the researcher's initial contact. As discussed in Chapter 3, the original plan was to approach the schools that the researcher has existing links with. Unfortunately, whilst these schools generally indicated their support for the research, all of them declined the invitation to take part in this research. The contacts at these schools expressed similar reasons for saying no, with the main one relating to the increased pressure on staff to help children to 'catch up' with the curriculum and mitigate the negative impact of the months of "lost-learning" time endured by pupils. Another school and therefore they were subject to increased restrictions on the activities they get involved in. On the few lucky occasions when a school did respond and ask for more information about the study, the process would stall again when the school failed to reply to the researcher's follow up emails and requests for telephone meetings.

Another challenge stems from the potential inconvenience that may be caused to the organisations that agree to host external researchers (Lapierre, 2019). To address this, it is important to emphasise how the research project will benefit the host organisation by taking the time to understand its key operational priorities. In the case of this research, finding a primary school that was willing to support the research project was a frustratingly long and difficult process. Therefore, offering something as an expression of gratitude, can increase the likelihood that the organisation will agree to take part in the research and grant access to the participants. Again, this is where a pedagogical approach can assist the researcher if

approaching schools. The researcher may offer to prepare a summary report of the study's key findings, making an effort to highlight the insights that are most relevant to children's education and the current curriculum. Alternatively, this report could highlight the most important insights that are relevant to the work or goals of the organisation. Other strategies here could include offering a small financial donation to the organisation or a cause of its choice, which may be beneficial for not-for-profit and charitable organisations.

Related to this, another barrier to recruiting young participants for research studies relates to the additional measures that are necessary to protect children in research, compliance with which is always a mandatory requirement of ethics approval committees. As a result of the potential risks involved to both the participants and the researcher, conducting research with children can be somewhat of an ethical minefield (Lapierre, 2019). The primary role of ethics committees within research institutions is to evaluate the risks and benefits of proposed studies and if necessary, they can prevent projects from going ahead. Despite this, it is ultimately the researcher's responsibility to look after their participants in the field (Chan, Teram and Shaw, 2017). As outlined earlier in Chapter 3, in this project the researcher was required to apply for an enhanced criminal record check from the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) in the UK and ensure that research data was protected in accordance with GDPR. It was also necessary to comply with the requirements to obtain informed consent from the parents and caregivers of the participants as well as from the children themselves.

Taking all this into consideration, researchers should take the time to develop tasks that incorporate participants' familiarity with the formats of existing classroom or childhood activities to maximise the time spent with their participants. This was the case in this research, where the original 90-minute workshop plan had to be adapted into several 45-minute sessions, to fit in with the host schools schedule and avoid excessive disruption to the participants' usual timetable.

Aside from this, there is the potential for the four workshop activities introduced here, to be used individually or in combination with other participatory techniques as a starting point for future studies. These activities are not only suitable for use in studies of children's marketing, but some of them can be easily adapted to fit explorations into other research topics. For example, the Value Trolley exercise is based on the principle of categorising items according to a simple colour coded traffic light system to facilitate discussions around children

spending habits by identifying items that children like to spend their own money on. As described previously, this exercise required children to add colour coded post-it notes onto a large board that featured a simple illustration of a shopping trolley (an image with which they were likely to be familiar). The trolley itself was split into three sections by colour as shown in Image 3.1.

The red category represented the highest value items (in monetary terms). Logically, this was designed as the smallest section of the trolley to reflect the assumed infrequency of 'big ticket' purchases made by children. The yellow section was positioned in the middle of the trolley to indicate where to put items that were considered to be of medium value. The largest section was highlighted in green to represent the low-value, everyday items that children were likely to purchase the most frequently (based on UK industry data).

This easy to understand, simple technique for categorisations can be adapted into other research designs. For example, it could be used in its current form (i.e. shopping trolley) as a way of categorising healthy - unhealthy grocery and food options within a supermarket. It would also be possible to substitute the image of a shopping trolley for another image that is more appropriate to the research questions of a particular study. In this way, this particular exercise can be incorporated into any research project that focuses on levels of importance, levels of value etc. The key point being that the image used is one that is familiar and easily recognisable by participants with little explanation.

Furthermore, the Graffiti Wall exercise was developed by adapting what is already an established research technique (Fajerman et al., 2004; Mathers et al., 2010) to facilitate discussions around children's perceptions of brands. As argued previously, to the researcher's best knowledge, this specific technique has not been used previously in any area of children's marketing research. Therefore, in demonstrating its successful application in this PhD research may lead to its adoption in future research studies with children. It is also the researcher's opinion that like the "Value-Trolley", the Graffiti Wall can also easily adapt to the study of other topics and is relatively low cost and simple to implement. It can be used in explorations of any topic, where participants are encouraged to work together as a group and/or in circumstances where they may benefit from having a non-verbal, visual communication option for expressing themselves freely.

There is real skill involved in crafting activities that are not just suitable for children based on these principles, but that also align with the research topic to facilitate the collection of data that will help to answer a project's research questions. The key assumption to keep in mind is that the insights created as a result of these methods can be more meaningful, more credible and more applicable, especially where those insights relate to policy decisions or proposed solutions to social problems (MacNaughton, Rolfe and Siraj-Blatchford, 2008). Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the researcher only created one of the workshop activities from scratch, which was the aforementioned Value Trolley exercise. The other three workshop activities were developed through a process of adaptation of existing methods and pilot-testing to suit the requirements of the study, a point that leads on to the benefits of the second approach, which draws upon design-thinking. This approach is explained in the Implications for Marketing Researchers (Section 6.4) in the following Chapter.

5.6 Methodological Reflections

Recognition of the limitations for traditional research methodologies has encouraged researchers to adopt more inclusive and creative ways for involving children in research (Leigh, 2020; Thomas and O'Riordan, 2024) but this is not the usual approach within the field of advertising literacy research. As noted in Chapter 3, creative research methods are considered to be an enabling methodology (Gauntlett and Holsworth, 2006). These methods often reveal more honest and authentic responses than would be captured with more traditional methods (Brown and Leigh, 2019). Using creative methods facilitated this study on several levels. The use of the graffiti wall, the storyboarding exercise and the packaging design task allowed the children to truly participate within the research and know that their voices were heard and valued even when they struggled to speak or write words that perhaps expressed their thoughts.

The findings are presented in narrative form, and include verbatim quotes from the participants, and some examples of the designs created. When it came to analysis of the children's designs in this research they were considered as a stimulus for discussion, but it is acknowledged that they could also be viewed as artefacts in their own right (Latour, 1999). On reflection they could also have been used in the second phase of data collection as prompts during the interviews and to triangulate the data from the creative workshops as has been effective elsewhere in other areas of childhood research (Mizen and Ofusu-Kusi, 2010).

This could be an area of improvement for future advertising literacy researchers wishing to use similar methods.

5.7 Summary of Discussion Chapter

To summarise the main point of this Chapter, by adopting an interdisciplinary approach, this PhD research has revealed rich and novel insights into children's consumption and their understanding of the commercialised environment that has become omnipresent in their everyday lives. These insights highlight the need to recognise both the social and relational nature of children's development when exploring children's advertising literacy. In this way, this PhD research can complement the existing literature by providing insights as to the reasons why commercial content may be still persuasive even when it is recognised to be so. This PhD research makes an original contribution to theoretical knowledge with the introduction of the Layers of Literacy conceptual framework in Figure 5.1. This framework integrates elements of existing advertising literacy theories with additional elements obtained from empirical research on contemporary advertising formats.

This thesis also makes an original contribution to qualitative research methods literature by presenting the creative workshop method as a viable alternative to the traditional focus group. This is enhanced with the explanation of two distinct approaches to developing research tools based on practical activities that can be used in projects with children and young people.

The following Chapter 6, concludes this PhD thesis with a reflection on the research journey, the value and relevance of this work and the implications for marketing policy and practice. Chapter 6 also considers the limitations of this work (Section 6.6) and provides suggestions for future children's advertising literacy research (Section 6.8).

6.0 Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this Chapter is to conclude this PhD thesis by bringing together the key contributions of this work and by evaluating the overall success of the project in terms of its original research objectives. This Chapter also aims to highlight the practical outcomes of this research, which includes a discussion of the evidence-based implications for policy makers regarding current advertising regulations and restrictions and recommendations for practitioners on how to embed socially-responsible principles into three areas of child-targeted marketing practice in the UK (6.4). This is followed by a section on applying Design Thinking to the research planning process (6.5). This Chapter concludes with the researcher's reflections on this project, the limitations of the work and highlights two areas for future research.

6.1.1 The Relevance of this PhD Research

This Chapter begins by returning to one of the key points that has been consistently reiterated throughout this thesis, which is that a better understanding of the impacts of the commercialised media environment on children's lives should be considered essential by everyone who is involved in promoting the healthy development of children and adolescents (Rideout et al., 2010). From the dual perspectives of marketing and sociology research, this naturally includes the people who have close relationships with children, such as parents, caregivers, and teachers, but it also applies to the "commercial organisations, policy makers and researchers" who have their own vested interests in children's marketing (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008, p638). With this in mind, the aim of this PhD research was to strive for the development of a more nuanced conceptualisation of children's marketing and advertising literacy. A conceptualisation that not only acknowledges the need to protect children from the risks of deceptive, harmful or misleading commercialised communications, but one that also recognises the theoretical importance of empowering children as consumers in their own right. It was also important to consider the potential for children's marketing exposure and experience to have positive impacts, with the view that this should also be incorporated into ethically-grounded marketing policies, regulation and practice in the contemporary media environment.

6.1.2 The Value of this PhD Research

As such this PhD thesis, with the theoretical and methodological contributions presented in this Chapter, along with its recommendations for socially-responsible marketing policy and practice as presented in this Chapter, intervenes in established debates about the commercialisation of childhood, the pernicious nature of child-targeted marketing and the complexity of children's culture. Specifically, this thesis introduces a novel conceptual framework in Figure 5.1, which offers an alternative perspective to the study of children's advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment, thus forging a dialogue between disciplines in terms of research on advertising and children and children's consumption in the context of the increasingly digital lifestyles of today's young consumers.

6.1.3 Revisiting the Research Questions

At this point, it is appropriate to return to the original research questions. Whilst these questions were addressed in the previous Chapter (Section 5.2), they are revisited here to further explicate what aspects of children's advertising literacy can now be better understood because of this PhD research.

6.1.3.1 RQ1: *What are children's perceptions of contemporary advertising formats?*

As noted in Section 5.2.1 in the previous Chapter, there was a shared view amongst the participants that 'advertising' - as they understood it - is everywhere, and is therefore somewhat inescapable in today's society. The most logical explanation for this being the increasing commercialisation of media formats in both the physical environment and in metaverse (as noted in Section 4.2.2). These insights appear to suggest that children have accepted the idea of the 'omnipresence' of advertising to a large extent, which has led to a generalised expectation that they will probably be exposed to some form of advertising on a daily basis. For researchers, this further justifies the need to update existing conceptualisations of advertising along the lines of the definition introduced by this thesis in Section 2.3.1, as "all forms of commercially-motivated communication that intend to promote brands, products and services to a target audience".

Despite expecting to encounter advertising regularly, there is still a lack of awareness amongst children regarding the presence of embedded advertising in certain virtual contexts, for example within online gaming platforms such as Roblox and Fortnite. As noted in Section 4.2.6.2, this appears to stem from an understanding of certain online advertising regulations that stipulate that all advertising must be disclosed to an audience. Whilst this is correct in many ways and is a positive reflection of children's overall Dispositional advertising literacy (as discussed in Section 5.3.5), further analysis revealed that this has inadvertently led to the creation of the misperception that commercial agendas are always disclosed in a recognisable way regardless of format. Or as described by children in their own words - "*advertising has to tell you that it is advertising*", and if it does not, then it must not be an advertisement.

This was one of the novel insights to come out of this research, in the sense that it has implications for advertising researchers, practitioners and regulators.

For researchers, it indicates that there may be some additional consequences associated with the possession of well-developed Dispositional advertising literacy, which does not appear to have been examined in detail in previous studies. For example, having a high level of awareness and familiarity with contemporary commercial formats may unintentionally create a false sense of security for children, causing them to overestimate their ability to recognise advertising. Furthermore, children may be reassured by perceptions of trustworthiness and appropriateness caused by the recognition of transparent advertising disclosures.

Further analysis revealed additional depths to this insight in relation to children's interpretations of online advertisements. For example, in cases where commercial agendas are inadequately disclosed (i.e. via the complete omission of a verbal, textual or visual cue, or where these are explicitly obvious), findings indicated that children typically perceive this "non-sponsored" content as simply another form of entertainment. As noted in the Discussion Chapter (Section 5.2.1), previous research has also identified the convergence of commercial and entertainment content as potentially problematic for advertising literacy researchers (Freeman and Shapiro, 2014, Oates et al., 2016). For example, studies have shown that children are less likely to be critical of any content that is perceived as entertainment (Rozendaal et al., 2016; De Jans et al., 2020). One explanation for this being that the lack of recognition (as a consequence of low elaboration), prevents the activation of advertising literacy when children are exposed to highly immersive or embedded forms of advertising (Buijzen et al., 2010).

Another explanation is that children have more positive associations and attitudes towards this type of advertising because of its entertainment value, thus reducing the likelihood of a critical response (Hudders et al., 2017). Hence, this thesis extends this knowledge by revealing that children may also interpret the messages communicated by such content as unbiased. Therefore, they might perceive any reviews or recommendations for specific products or brands as more genuine, authentic and reliable.

Not only does this suggest another explanation for the lack of critical response, it also indicates how the persuasive potential of perceived credibility (even if inaccurate), can be amplified even further depending on who is the source of the message (Sections 2.3.2.6; 2.3.6.3; 4.3.3.2), the perceived ‘value’ of the featured product or brand i.e. hedonic, usage or social (Section 4.5) and existing associations based on children’s personal consumption preferences (Section 5.3.1).

As argued at the very beginning of this thesis, new research needs to decode children’s increasingly digital lifestyles and adopt a more balanced view of children as consumers by exploring the broader social, cultural, and economic contexts in which children engage with advertising. By analysing children’s perceptions of contemporary advertising at the deeper level focusing on format characteristics (i.e. content, message, source and product – as shown in Table 2.8) The answers to RQ1 shed some light on advertising literacy theory in terms of its cognitive, attitudinal and moral dimensions. For practitioners and regulators, these insights also hint towards the need for standardisation of online advertising disclosures, which is discussed in more depth in Section 6.3.3 later in this Chapter.

6.1.3.2 RQ2: *What can a sociological perspective on consumption reveal about the nature of children’s advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment?*

This PhD thesis contends that all of its findings help to shed some light on the nature of children's advertising literacy to some extent. However, the specific focus of RQ2 was to explore the potential of an interdisciplinary approach to advertising literacy research, by drawing upon sociological perspectives on children’s consumption. RQ2 not only influenced the methodological design of this study, it also facilitated the emergence of several important insights regarding the social nature of children’s consumption and the extrinsic and intrinsic influences on the formation of their unique identities (as emphasised in Section 5.2.2.1).

The significance of these insights in terms of advertising literacy theory is based on two key arguments discussed throughout this thesis. The first relates to the criticisms surrounding the dominance of studies on children's advertising literacy at the individual level (see Sections 2.2.5.2; 2.5.2). The second is that despite all the evidence indicating a socio-contextual perspective as a potentially viable alternative (e.g. Sections 2.4.3; 4.3.4), it has rarely been considered in previous advertising literacy research.

From a theoretical perspective, by acknowledging that most, if not all advertising communications seek to leverage the power of social associations to influence consumers' purchase decisions (Mitchell and Imrie, 2011; Leiss et al., 2018), enabled the exploration of attitudinal dimensions of children's advertising literacy beyond the scope of existing theory. To a large extent, research on the attitudinal dimensions of advertising literacy relate to children's attitudes toward advertising in general, which manifest as two negative attitudes namely 'scepticism' and 'disliking of advertising' (as noted in Sections 2.5.3 & 5.2.2).

This research has shown that children can also respond to advertisements with a positive attitude, which may have little to do with their attitudes towards advertising in general. For example, findings indicated that children's pre-existing, favourable attitudes towards specific brands or products, and/or a specific sources (e.g. a favourite YouTuber), was associated with an automatic liking of all forms of advertisements that related to these preferences in some way. These insights suggest that children's positive attitudinal responses to advertising may also stem from the importance they place on the social 'value' of certain products and brands that can enhance their own authentic identity and help them ascertain a sense of belonging (as noted in the previous Chapter in Sections 5.2.2.1; 5.2.2.2 & 5.2.2.3).

At the time of writing, few studies have offered a comprehensive explanation as to the types of advertisements that children are more likely to like than dislike, and why this might be the case. Hence, these findings contribute to a better understanding of the attitudinal dimensions of advertising literacy. In that respect, these insights may also help to answer a question that has puzzled researchers for decades, which is why advertising is still persuasive for children and adults alike, even when their advertising literacy is theoretically fully developed?

6.1.3.3 RQ3: *How is children's advertising literacy enacted in practice?*

As noted earlier in Section 2.5.3, RQ3 was developed in response to a lack of studies relating to the application of advertising literacy in situ despite recent advances in research and the introduction of two 'new' constructs namely 'advertising literacy performance' (Rozendaal et al., 2011) and 'Situational advertising literacy' (Hudders et al., 2017). Current theory relating to both constructs maintains that the application of advertising literacy typically manifests in the form of a 'critical response' to an advertisement, which in turn reduces children's susceptibility to unwanted effects and decreases their desire to purchase (Valkenburg, 2000; Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Rozendaal et al., 2011; Rozendaal et al., 2016; De Jans et al., 2017; Nelson, 2018; Zarouali et al., 2019; Oprea et al., 2021).

The conceptualisation of advertising literacy as a practice presented in this thesis (shown as Figure 2.4 in Section 5.3.4), is based upon sociological views of literacy as a lived experience (Rockhill, 1987). It is grounded in the insights from previous research that align to this view, for example the idea that advertising literacy is a complex process of sensemaking (Mitchell, Macklin and Paxman, 2007), based upon the ways in which advertisements are read, the social interactions facilitated by these readings, and how these interactions influence, and are influenced by children's individual and group identities (Ritson and Elliot, 1995).

One of the most interesting insights to come out of this research was the discovery of children's willingness and ability to evaluate advertisements (see Section 4.4.7). Analysis at a deeper level revealed a complex process of evaluation involving a series of judgements not only relating to the general format and features of advertising but the specific characteristics of advertisements as well. As discussed earlier in Sections 4.4.8 & 5.2.3, the process of evaluation often happens intuitively, informed by both emotional and rational factors, which are used heuristically to inform purchase decisions.

Hence, in answer to RQ3, this research has identified children's engagement in a process of evaluation as one way in which children's advertising literacy is enacted in practice. This directly relates to the second issue highlighted at the beginning of this thesis, which centres on *how* to define the form and function of children's advertising literacy as a concept (Ritson and Elliot, 1999; Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Malmelin, 2010; Nelson, 2018), how to measure it (Ham, Nelson and Das, 2015; Rozendaal, Oprea and Buijzen, 2016; Boerman, van

Reijmersdal, Rozendaal and Lima, 2018) and ongoing debates surrounding how this knowledge is actually applied in practice (Rozendaal et al., 2011; Hudders et al., 2017).

It is important to acknowledge that there are rarely straightforward, simple or ‘neat’ answers to research questions in exploratory research studies (Stebbins, 2001). However, this issue is not considered to be a disadvantage in this PhD. On the contrary, as argued previously in Chapter 3, an exploratory research design was chosen as the most appropriate path here to follow for a number of reasons (Section 3.2). The first being that exploratory approaches typically enable researchers to commence their projects with an open mind. These approaches provide a certain amount of freedom and flexibility, allowing the project to be guided by what is discovered along the way and by the patterns that emerge from the data (Haraway, 1988). These inductive approaches are also thought to empower the participants of a study, which helps to reduce the risk that any findings might be influenced by a researcher’s own personal biases or preconceived assumptions based on existing knowledge (Stebbins, 2001). Exploratory approaches to research also facilitate the application of theory and ideas from more than one discipline, which is especially useful when attempting to take a fresh look at an established topic from an alternative perspective to what has been done before (Stebbins, 2001). Indeed, that is the case with this project, where the researcher was keen to explore the potential value that could be gained from adapting concepts that are traditionally grounded in sociological theory as an alternative lens for the study of children’s advertising literacy within the marketing discipline. In doing so, the researcher hoped that the insights generated by this thesis would address some of the theoretical shortcomings of the most dominant theories of advertising literacy as identified previously in the literature review (Chapter 2; Section 2.2.6).

6.1.4. The Case for Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Creation of New Knowledge

It is worth emphasising that both the theoretical and methodological contributions of this PhD research ultimately stem from its interdisciplinary, exploratory approach. Indeed, when it comes to one of the main criteria for assessing the scientific quality of a PhD thesis - that is the necessity for a doctoral student to make an original contribution to knowledge (Mewburn, 2020) – evidence suggests that a single doctoral researcher can utilise an interdisciplinary approach as the basis for the creation of new knowledge. As Dunleavy (2003, p40) articulates:

“Being original in the modern social sciences... is rarely about coming up with an entirely new way of looking at things... it is mostly a more moderate activity... originality involves encountering an established idea or viewpoint or method in one part of your discipline (or in a neighbouring discipline) and then taking that idea for a walk and putting it down somewhere else, applying it in a different context or for a different purpose.”

Indeed, in the very early stages of this PhD research, one of the initial objectives was first to establish if, and how the principles of interdisciplinarity research might facilitate an alternative approach to the study of children’s advertising literacy, that is to take sociological concepts “for a walk” and put them down in the marketing discipline (Dunleavy, 2003, p40). Interdisciplinarity is generally viewed as a positive move on the whole for all research within the social sciences (Broto et al., 2009; Nowotny et al., 2013; Repko, et al., 2017). Interdisciplinarity is also an approach that is increasingly encouraged by many high-profile research funding bodies (Connelly et al., 2017) including the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which generously funded this PhD research. More specifically, as highlighted in earlier Chapters, interdisciplinarity is also an idea that has gained traction in recent years amongst other contemporary advertising literacy researchers (Valkenburg and Piotrowski, 2017) however it is still a relatively uncommon approach in this area.

Nevertheless, after an extensive review of the advertising literacy literature, the researcher came to the conclusion that interdisciplinarity could indeed offer an alternative approach to prior research that could add value to the existing body of knowledge. Interdisciplinarity could facilitate a more holistic view of children’s advertising literacy by enabling the researcher to draw upon a wider range of sources (Lyle, 2017). It was decided that interdisciplinarity was worth exploring as it would help to shift the emphasis of advertising literacy research from the cognitive abilities of the individual child (i.e. guided by previous ‘ages and stages’ perspectives of child development, as proposed by Piaget, (1960) and John, (1999) and potentially address some of the shortcomings of these theories (Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005 and Rozendaal, Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2010). Interdisciplinarity would enable the researcher to focus more on the influence of the media environment on children’s interactions with marketing and advertising and their ability to understand it.

Whilst they may be in the minority compared to many marketing researchers (Kunkel, 2001), sociological scholars in particular have argued in favour of a more holistic view of childhood for many years (James, 1999; Cook, 2004b; Sparrman et al., 2012) not least as a counter

argument to the widely held viewpoint that children are less than complete, beings-in-the-making (Cook, 2014). To some, developmentalism as an overarching school of thought in cross-disciplinary childhood consumption and marketing research is considered to present a narrow view of “the child”, which ultimately leads to similarly constrained views of “the market” and ultimately “what constitutes consumption” (Cook, 2014, p64). On the one hand, Cook’s (2014) frustrations with the widely-held, ‘narrow’ view of childhood may possibly relate to the difficulties involved in breaking away from the theoretical path carved out by existing research. These frustrations may also refer to the challenges of conducting research with children more broadly, in situations where researchers often face many obstacles beyond those that relate to the precedent set by historical research.

To overcome this, Cook (2008, p235) suggests that:

“sincere effort at getting to know children and childhood in all their manifestations and contexts will serve scholarship as well as being a guidepost on the way out of this analytical cul-de-sac”.

Arguably, such attempts to truly understand children in all “their manifestation and contexts” as Cook, (2008, p235) encourages scholars to do, is much easier said than done in practice.

It is perhaps best viewed as a representation of an idealised, if somewhat ambitious, blueprint for future research. Nevertheless, these sentiments influenced the direction of the early stages of this PhD research. This influence is best reflected in Figure 6.1., which is a reproduction of the original conceptual framework used to guide this PhD research (previously introduced in Chapter 2 as Figure 2.5). To reiterate, this conceptual framework was developed as a result of the literature review to provide a visualisation of the theoretical scope of this PhD project and attempt to represent how two traditionally separate, yet related bodies of literature and thought (i.e. children’s marketing theory and children’s consumption theory) could be incorporated into this PhD study.

This framework is a relatively simple visualisation but it seeks to draw attention to the contemporary media environment as the overarching context of this PhD research. It also emphasises the researcher’s sincere quest for “getting to know [the] children [in this research]” as suggested by Cook (2008, p235) through the exploration of their own perspectives (as indicated in RQ1). In addition, this framework indicates where the project’s second research question (RQ2) is situated in relation to the intersections of the two

disciplines Furthermore, this framework highlights the researcher's focus on understanding the actual enactment, or *application* of advertising literacy in practice (RQ3). This was to enhance previous research, which has primarily focused solely on children's possession of 'conceptual' advertising knowledge through measures of recall or recognition of explicit or obvious advertising formats (Rozendaal, et al., 2011; Hudders et al., 2017; Zarouali et al., 2019).

On this point, as it has also been extensively argued in Chapter 2 (Section 2.2.5.1), the perspective of cognitive development (i.e. 'ages and stages frameworks' of development) has tended to dominate both the fields of children and marketing (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008; Nairn and Fine, 2008; Buijzen et al., 2010; Kunkel, 2010) and children's consumption research in sociology (Cook, 2004a; 2008; Sparrman et al., 2012). Yet, despite its dominance and widespread use within cross-disciplinary childhood research studies, ages and stages perspectives have also attracted some criticism from scholars over the last 20 years (Lawlor and Prothero, 2003; Bartholomew and O'Donohoe, 2003; Nairn et al., 2008; Rozendaal et al., 2011; Nelson, 2018). To recap, one of the main criticisms tends to relate to the perceived limitations of advertising literacy studies that are based on a universalistic, linear perspective of childhood, one which neglects to consider the social, cultural and contextual elements of children's lives when explaining children's understanding of advertising and marketing material.

Therefore, after identifying this particular issue in the literature, the decision was made to adopt an interdisciplinary approach in this research to theoretically merge sociological perspectives on children's consumption with historical and current advertising literacy theory. As stated before, the goal of this PhD thesis was not to disregard, debunk or break away from existing knowledge entirely, but rather to critically assess two bodies of literature in order to identify concepts and areas of consensus that could be built upon to facilitate a robust analysis and interpretation of the data collected in this PhD, and ultimately generate insights that could enhance existing theory and what is already known on this topic.

As it has also been highlighted in Section 3.2.1 thesis, the interdisciplinary approach to the overall design of this PhD research was particularly appropriate and beneficial to this study based on the understanding that both marketing and sociology scholars have begun to recognise the limitations of established cognitive developmental perspectives on childhood.

These perspectives dominate the study of children's advertising literacy and research into their behaviours as consumers (Lawlor and Prothero, 2003; Bartholomew and O'Donohoe, 2003; Nairn et al., 2008; Rozendaal et al., 2011; Nelson, 2019). Although, despite there being some agreement between scholars on this point, it is apparent that there is still a disconnect that exists between the two disciplines in terms of their views on how to define modern childhood, and this seems to guide their perspectives on childhood consumption. For instance, sociologists working within the field of Consumer Culture Theory have long recognised that children can, and should be considered competent consumers as opposed to incompetent consumers and inferior to adults (Cook, 2004b; Wyness, 2006; Buckingham and Tingstad, 2014).

6.2 Research Inspiration

Indeed, one of the main inspirations behind the decision to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to this PhD research was introduced at the very beginning of this thesis, with Kline's (1993) observation that:

“Marketing's ethnography of childhood...validated children's emotional and fantasy experience... The marketers didn't have to assume that children's daydreams, hero worship, absurdist humour and keen sense of group identity were meaningless distractions or artefacts of immaturity. Rather, they recognised that these attributes were the deep roots of children's culture, which could be employed as effective tools for communicating with them. Identifying the basis of children's experience provided the means for transforming them into a market segment.” - Kline, (1993, p19)

On the one hand, Kline's (1993) reflection infers that an appreciation of children's culture and everything that it embodies should be considered fundamental to the understanding of contemporary advertising and its impact on children and young people. From a commercial viewpoint, this makes sense. Yet as it has been evidenced so far, Kline's (1993) ideas have rarely been considered in children's advertising literacy research. From a different perspective, Kline's (1993) observation can also be seen to exemplify the division that exists between academia and practice in general, that is the disconnect between the work of marketing academics and that of marketing practitioners.

6.2.1 The Disconnect between Marketing Academics and Marketing Practitioners

To elaborate, as it was discussed in Section 2.2.5, advertising literacy research within academia has traditionally concentrated on the individual cognitive processes that underpin a child's ability to recognise, recall and to some extent disregard advertising attempts (Robertson and Rossiter, 1974; Zarouali et al., 2019). This stream of research has primarily

focused on the deconstruction and measurement of children's understanding of the purpose of commercial material (usually as it appears in its most obvious formats). Predominantly, this research has concerned itself with answering the two questions introduced earlier, which relate to *how* and *when* this children develop this understanding develops and more importantly - how their levels of understanding gradually improves in accordance with specific stages of their psychological development as they mature from infancy to adolescence (John, 1999; Wright, Freistad and Boush, 2005; Rozendaal et al., 2011; Hudders et al., 2017).

Typically, the outcomes of such research have centred on the development of evidence-based proposals and suggestions for the most effective ways to regulate the advertising industry, recommendations which are largely based on children's age and their assumed competencies and little else (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006). Prior advertising literacy research that adopts these views has tended to assume that children will possess an adult-like understanding of advertising by the time they are 12 years old (John, 1999) despite recent evidence that suggests that advertising understanding continues to develop up until the age of 16 (Zarouali, Verdoodt, Walrave, Poels, Ponnet and Lievens, 2020). Children under the age of 12 are assumed to lack sophistication in their ability to understand advertising (Kunkel et al., 2004; Wright, Friestad and Boush, 2005) which is largely based on prior research into children's cognitive capacity (Lapierre, 2019). Therefore, preadolescent children are typically considered to be less competent when compared to adults in terms of their ability to cope with advertising attempts (Bartholomew and O'Donohoe, 2003; Moses and Baldwin, 2005).

In contrast to academics, it is clear that marketing practitioners have never assumed that children are inferior to adults in terms of their willingness or their ability to consume. Indeed, children have long been recognised by marketers as a lucrative target segment (Schor, 2005), both as consumers in their own right and in terms of their considerable influence on family purchase decisions and household spending (Shoham and Dalakas, 2005; Dikcius, Urbonavicius, Pakalniskiene and Pikturniene, 2020). There is obvious evidence that marketers do make a conscious effort to 'get to know' and understand their young consumers right from the initial development stages of a product or service, and that they use these insights as the basis of their marketing strategies to maximise their effect and the return on investment (Schor, 2005; Mayo and Nairn, 2009). Clearly, marketing practitioners have always valued children's opinions and input into the whole marketing process (Kline, 1993;

Mayo and Nairn, 2009) and many brands continue to consider children to be just as valuable and profitable a market segment as their parents and caregivers are, as a specific consumer group that is worthy of attention and strategic targeting (Schor, 2005; Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2023). Again, this perspective appears to be rarely considered in children's advertising literacy research. As a result of this reasoning, young children have been subject to special restrictions and considerations within the marketplace for decades.

It is imperative that marketing practitioners continue to navigate a complex landscape of ethical considerations when targeting children, balancing the need to promote products with the responsibility to protect a potentially vulnerable audience. Ethical marketing to children requires transparency and a commitment to promoting positive values and behaviours.

On this point, the specific implications of this PhD research in terms of child-targeted marketing and advertising policy are presented in Subsection 6.3 of this Chapter.

6.2.2 Consensus between Marketing Academics and Marketing Practitioners

Returning to the literature, in terms of consensus between academia and industry, both contemporary marketing theory scholars and marketing practitioners acknowledge and agree that today's young consumers have higher expectations than the children of previous generations in terms of their consumption habits (Thangavel, Pathak and Chandra, 2019; Schor, 2005). For example, not only do today's young consumers have a tendency to seek quality and value in exchange for their costs, as it was emphasised in Subsection 5.2.3, children also demonstrate a preference and almost an expectation for instant gratification of their material wants and needs within the contemporary marketplace (Vollero, Sardanelli and Siano, 2021). Despite this, on the whole, academic advertising literacy research has rarely considered children's agency as competent consumers with their own material wants, desires and needs (Cook, 2008; Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008; Sparrman et al., 2012; Lapierre, 2019).

In contrast, as discussed previously in Section 2.4.2, it can be surmised that the way in which young consumers are viewed by sociologists is very much aligned with the views of marketing practitioners in industry. Certainly, it is evident that a deep appreciation of children's culture is reflected in the strategies that marketers choose to position their products and services to appeal specifically to children in the marketplace. It is evident in the designs

that they choose to use on their packaging and point-of-sale displays and in the ways that they communicate their commercially-motivated messages via broadcast and online communications tactics. An appreciation of children's culture is also reflected in the choice of source, that is the brand spokesperson, influencer or celebrity that they choose to deliver advertising messages. However, the characteristics of contemporary advertising, relating to product, message and source (as detailed in Table 2.3), have typically received much less attention in advertising literacy studies with children (Lampert et al., 2021). Where advertising characteristics have been researched previously, studies have tended to look at one or two specific characteristics in isolation based on children's ability to recognise typical features of advertising formats (Hudders et al., 2017; Zarouali et al., 2019). With recognition and recall used to measure levels of advertising literacy. Furthermore, these studies have a deductive tendency to pre-determine the characteristics of interest, as opposed to the inductive approach adopted in this PhD, where the data was entrusted with revealing characteristics of interest from the perspectives of participants.

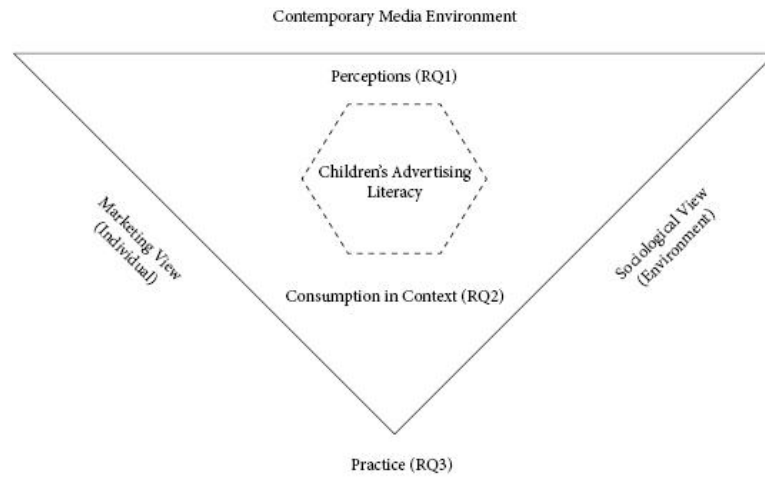
Evidently, where the target customers of a company or brand happen to be children, it is not unreasonable to acknowledge the logic which underlies the marketing practitioners' view - that is that children hold their own personal consumer attitudes and also possess a level of consumer power. From an advertising literacy theory viewpoint, these attitudes and power should be assumed to exist regardless of children's ability to recognise, 'understand' and be critical or sceptical of the agenda of the contemporary advertising to which they are exposed.

However, the typical viewpoint shared by many academics is that children's advertising literacy is only triggered or activated in circumstances where an advertising attempt is actually recognised by children. As discussed in Section 5.3 in the previous Chapter, there remain issues with these particular definitions of advertising literacy. To summarise, the general consensus is that children's competence in coping with such advertising is a) determined by their age, and b) demonstrated by their ability to apply a critical attitude towards advertising in general. This in turn results in a tangible or measurable reduction in purchase intention (Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Rozendaal et al., 2011; Lapierre, 2019).

The original iteration of the conceptual framework (shown in Figure 6.1) aimed to reduce the reliance on chronological age as the only proxy for maturity (Nairn and Fine, 2008) by

incorporating consumption in context and the importance of social and cultural elements of children's lives in children's advertising literacy theory.

Figure 6.1 Original Conceptual Framework



(Source: Author's own work).

As argued earlier, previous advertising literacy reasoning is based predominantly upon ages and stages models of child development, such as those introduced by Piaget, (1960) and John, (1999). Whereas, in drawing upon the new childhood studies paradigm (James and Prout, 1997), in this framework (represented by the 'sociological view' in Figure 6.1, the researcher sought to avoid the teleological assumption that children are "incomplete, less-than-knowledgeable beings whose movement is toward an assumed or desired state of being or knowing" (Cook, 2008, p233) in terms of their consumer behaviour. Instead the goal was to recognise them as "social subjects and social objects in the world - as subjects who have knowledge and desire for consumer goods" (Cook, 2008, p235). In other words, the objective here was to use this conceptual framework (Figure 6.1) as the basis for a PhD research project that could acknowledge the ways in which marketing practitioners who are responsible for the promotion of the world's most desirable and profitable brands take children's preferences and sensibilities seriously (Kline, 1993; Schor, 2005).

The final point to emphasise here is that even though interdisciplinary, exploratory research can be unpredictable and messy (Stebbins, 2001), it often leads to the discovery of unique insights that begin to fill the gaps in existing knowledge. That is certainly the case in this PhD research, where the main insights discussed in relation to each of the three themes are considered to be particularly valuable to the advancement of children's advertising literacy theory within the marketing discipline. The insights presented in this thesis are the result of a robust analysis of child-led discussions. Discussions that were facilitated by the use of the interdisciplinary framework which was grounded in prior research from two complementary disciplines; children's marketing and childhood consumption from sociology. Insights that have led to the development of a novel conceptual framework; Layers of Literacy (introduced in Figure 5.1). In summary, whilst interdisciplinary, exploratory research may *not* result in straightforward, definitive or clear-cut answers to specific research questions, it *can* reveal rich insights into the phenomenon in question, enable a step towards understanding children in all "their manifestation and contexts" (Cook, 2008, p235) and highlight avenues of exploration for future research.

6.3. Thesis Implications for Child-Targeted Advertising Policy

As highlighted at the very beginning of this thesis in Chapter 1, a significant amount of advertising literacy studies have focused on how to translate academic theory into tangible, practical outcomes that can inform policy decisions. This PhD research shares this focus and therefore highlights six areas where the efficacy of UK advertising regulations and restrictions could be improved.

This thesis contributes to the enduring debate surrounding the vulnerability of children as consumers. Although, despite championing the idea that there is value in adopting a sociological perspective of children as competent consumers within advertising literacy research, the arguments made in this thesis should not be taken as a direct refutation of the view that children still need additional consideration as a target market. On the contrary, this research supports the assertion that children should have additional protection to help reduce their exposure to harmful, misleading or inappropriate marketing formats in both the online environment and within the real world. As such, the findings of this research will be of interest to policymakers who are responsible for the continuous development of effective advertising regulations in the UK.

6.3.1 Contemporary Advertising Formats that ‘Slip Through the Regulatory Net’

From a regulatory perspective, current guidance stipulates that children, categorised as those under the age of 16 years old by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) in the UK, should be protected from *all marketing communication formats* that are potentially harmful, deceptive, offensive or inappropriate (ASA, 2022; CAP, 2022). The types of marketing communications that are most likely to fall under these categories are television advertisements, although the ASA and CAP codes also apply to advertisements on all social media platforms.

It is understandable that advertising on UK television has become so heavily regulated to the point where the UK has some of the most stringent regulations in the world. Even so, it must be noted that despite the strict restrictions on television advertising, evidence suggests that children still encounter advertisements for inappropriate products, such as alcohol brands when watching high-profile, televised international football matches (Gornall, 2014). Children are also frequently exposed to advertisements for HFSS foods when watching programmes via television-on-demand services such as *All 4* or *ITV X*. Some of these programmes would be subject to a “9pm watershed” (after which programmes that might be unsuitable for children can be broadcast) if viewed on live television (Ofcom, 2022). However, television-on-demand services make programmes available for viewing at any time. In addition, on-demand services typically broadcast advertisements that are suitable for the recommended age of the programme’s audience, which circumvents the watershed restriction.

Current policies are largely based upon evidence from previous advertising literacy research. However, it is no longer sufficient to base UK advertising legislation and regulation on advertising literacy research that predominantly focuses on television advertising. As the findings presented in this thesis have indicated, the online environment is arguably becoming more significant in children’s lives, yet it is not nearly as well controlled as traditional broadcast communications as an advertising medium. Furthermore, because of children’s increasing preferences for watching videos on YouTube instead of television programmes (Castonguay and Messina, 2022a), they also encounter inappropriate advertisements, such as for gambling services (Rossi et al., 2021) and alcohol products when they are watching programmes via online video streaming platforms.

6.3.2 Online Safety Bill

In terms of online advertising policy, the introduction of the Online Safety Bill (2023) has rightly acknowledged the need for further regulation of the online environment to protect children from harmful content, not just in terms of advertising effects. Based on the findings of this research, the focus on the immediate need for regulations of social media is rightly justified. However, to a large extent, the onus is on the platforms to take responsibility for the protection of young audiences, which is demonstrated through the implementation of age-verification procedures and content moderation strategies. YouTube for example has gone to the extent of developing an entirely separate, child-friendly version of the platform; ‘YouTube Kids’, where there are very few, if any, advertisements. However, as shown in these findings, this does not fully address the issue because many preadolescent children perceive YouTube Kids as a platform for much younger children, which was why none of the participants in this study used it to access YouTube content.

In terms of online games, various countries have started regulating Gacha mechanisms (see Section 2.3.3.4), particularly concerning transparency and protecting minors. Some regions require game developers to publish the odds of receiving each item, although there is a lack of research on whether or not children can understand these correctly. In terms of industry standards, game developers and platforms are increasingly adopting self-regulatory measures (CAP, 2024) although the main measure that has been implemented is a cap on spending.

6.3.3 Responsible Advertising Disclosures - The Case for Standardisation

As it has been noted earlier in this thesis, most if not all advertising literacy theories agree that there needs to be some form of recognition of commercial intent by a consumer in order to trigger a critical response (Rozendaal et al., 2011; Livingstone and Helsper, 2006; Lapierre, 2019). However, as it has also been noted in this thesis, the problem remains that commercial intent is difficult to identify within many contemporary advertising formats, which may be the result of a deliberate choice made by the marketer, or a consequence of an accidental oversight or miscommunication. Hence, the main issue in regulating online, embedded marketing is how to balance the needs of practitioners, for whom embedded marketing offers many ways to overcome consumers’ negative attitudes caused by ‘advertising fatigue’ (Hackley and Hackley, 2022) with the ethical principles of socially-

responsible marketing and the need to ensure that communications are legal, decent, honest and truthful (ASA, 2022).

Taking this into consideration, the next recommendation made in this thesis is that the industry introduce standardised disclosures for online advertising. Elsewhere, standardisation has proved a successful strategy within broadcast communications, where the black and white 'PP' symbol introduced in 2013 has become an established indicator of product placement (BCAP, 2023). In contrast, there are multiple disclosures in use online, which commonly include the terms 'ad', 'sponsored' and 'paid partnership'. However, there are currently no rules or guidelines in place as to which specific term should be used for different content on different platforms nor how these should be presented. Therefore, it is recommended that the advertising industry work together to address this by consulting with and involving key stakeholders in the development and introduction of standardised disclosures and specific instructions for their use to reduce any ambiguity caused by inconsistency.

Academic evidence should be also taken into consideration, including the findings of this PhD research. Overall, these findings concur with previous studies on embedded marketing, which indicate that young consumers have a clear preference for content that they perceive to be authentic and genuine (Vanwesenbeeck, Hudders and Ponnet, 2020; Rohde and Mau, 2021; Loose et al., 2023), even if it is actually commercially motivated.

Importantly, authenticity can be articulated in a number of ways. It is typically inferred by the distinct lack of any obvious signs of commercial agenda, sponsorship or paid partnership. However, these findings enhance previous work by indicating that authenticity can also be communicated by portraying a sense of realism. This could take the form of content that presents balanced reviews or endorsements from relevant or relatable personalities and that shows products in 'real life' scenarios. These findings also concur with the suggestions that children are more receptive to commercial messages that are not obviously commercially motivated (Van Dam and van Reijmersdal, 2019; Castonguay and Messina, 2022a) and indicate that they can be sceptical of overly positive messages. Therefore, it is important to consider insights into the associations between explicit communication of commercial intent and perceived relevance when developing disclosures.

Feedback should also be sought from marketing practitioners, influencers and brands to determine the most appropriate and effective options. These should be tested with multiple audiences, including children and young people. Not only is there a need for an element of standardisation with disclosures, there also needs to be agreement across all stakeholders including influencers, content creators, advertisers and social media platforms to use them consistently. Online disclosures need to become the ‘norm’ in the same way that the product placement symbol is on broadcast media. This will also assist those who are not professional content creators but who may still post commercially motivated content to a young audience. There also needs to be clearer guidance from both the ASA and CAP in the UK in terms of who is responsible for ensuring compliance with the correct use of advertising disclosures. Furthermore, in terms of the implications for advertising literacy education, the introduction of standardised disclosures would also make it easier for organisations such as ‘Media Smart’ to create consistent educational resources and initiatives relating to embedded advertising.

6.3.4 Children’s Exposure to Offline Advertising Formats

A key point to emphasise here is that persistent exposure to commercially motivated material is not just a specific issue in the online environment. On the contrary, these findings show that this exposure has become an unavoidable element of the offline environment too, to the point where children perceive ‘advertising’ as practically inescapable in their everyday lives. As discussed in the introductory Chapter (Chapter 1), despite heavy restrictions on advertising to children in the UK, children do still have plenty of opportunities to see advertisements for unhealthy, inappropriate and age-restricted products.

6.3.4.1 Unhealthy Products - HFSS Foods

Food advertising is one of the most regulated areas, yet there are currently very few restrictions on HFSS foods promotion via offline marketing channels beyond those relating to the physical and geographical placement of out-of-home media, such as billboards, digital ‘six-sheet’ displays, the branded ‘wrapping’ of public transport vehicles and bus back advertising. In addition, there are few restrictions on the promotion of unhealthy ‘junk’ foods in retail and shopping environments, for example via in-store displays, promotional merchandise, and brand sponsorship. In reality, children in the UK have many opportunities to see marketing materials that promote the consumption of HFSS foods. This suggests that whilst the increased scholarly attention on children’s exposure to online marketing formats is

certainly justified, both researchers and policymakers must acknowledge that this is only part of the picture and that the impact of marketing on children as it exists in ‘real world’ environments must not be neglected.

6.3.4.2 Responsible Placement of Advertisements for Age-Restricted Products

In the real world, children are regularly exposed to promotional material for inappropriate and age-restricted products via retail displays and sales promotions present in supermarkets and shopping centres. One particularly concerning issue from a marketing perspective is the blatant visibility of advertising materials encouraging the purchase of electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) and vaping devices (‘vapes’). E-cigarette specialist retailers are becoming more commonplace in the UK as the number of people who use nicotine delivery devices increases (McNeill, Brose, Calder, Simonavicius and Robson, 2021).

Whilst this PhD research does not explicitly explore the marketing and promotion of vaping devices with children, over the course of the project it has become more apparent that this is a real problem. Alarming, there is growing evidence suggesting that vapes are being used amongst children and young people (McDonald, 2023) even within the school environment because by their nature, they are much harder to detect than traditional tobacco products. A survey by NHS Digital showed a doubling of regular vape use for 11 to 15 year olds to 4% in 2021, compared to 2% in 2018. This was confirmed in a survey by the charity; Action on Smoking and Health (ASH), which also showed a sharp increase in vaping among 11 to 17 year-olds from 4% in 2020 before the first coronavirus (COVID-19) lockdown, to 7% in 2022 (ASH, 2023).

From a policy perspective, there are currently no regulations or restrictions regarding the offline promotion and advertisement of vaping devices in the UK. Retailers are free to advertise, display and promote their products in shops and supermarkets across the country. At present, e-cigarettes are highly visible. They are not hidden from view in supermarkets and shops in the same way that tobacco products are required to be concealed by law. However, there is an argument to say that vaping products are particularly appealing to children and young people because of the wide range of bright colours of the devices and flavours that are available such as candyfloss, blue sour raspberry and watermelon, which mimic the flavours of popular children’s sweets (McDonald, 2023).

Alarmingly, recent investigations have also revealed that e-cigarette brand; ‘Elf Bar’ actually enlisted a number of social media influencers to openly promote their products to children on TikTok (Das and Ungood-Thomas, 2022). The difficulties in regulating advertising in the online environment have been thoroughly noted throughout this thesis. Nevertheless, it is recommended that the content moderators on the social media platforms, which are likely to be accessed by children (regardless of current age-restrictions) prioritise this issue and endeavour to make an increased effort to actively identify and remove any form of promotion for e-cigarettes or vaping products (including sponsored posts, videos and incentivised reviews).

Whilst children under the age of 18 years cannot legally purchase these products themselves in the UK, a legal loophole exists, which allows free samples of vaping products to be given to people of any age (McNeill et al., 2021). Clearly, there is an urgent need to reduce children’s exposure to these products. Therefore, it is recommended that policymakers introduce new laws governing the marketing of these products, which mandate that all e-cigarettes and vaping products should be concealed from view in retail environments in line with the visual restrictions on the marketing of tobacco products.

6.4 Thesis Implications for Marketing Practitioners

Whilst the efforts of platforms like YouTube are to be commended, as a self-regulatory industry, marketing practitioners should also honour their responsibilities towards young consumers and endeavour to embed socially-responsible thinking into all of their marketing practices. Therefore, this thesis offers two specific recommendations for consideration by marketing practitioners in the online environment:

1. Responsible Targeting
2. Responsible Design

6.4.1 Responsible Targeting

Practitioners have a responsibility to ensure that all marketing communications are targeted accurately. They must not rely solely upon the current age-verification procedures and content moderation strategies of individual social media and video-sharing platforms.

Practitioners should consider the evidence presented in this research regarding the ease with which age verification procedures can be sidestepped and the ‘opportunities to see’

advertisements for inappropriate and age-restricted products and services (e.g. promoting alcohol, nicotine and gambling). As such, more effort should be made to work in collaboration with social media platforms to utilise consumer data appropriately when developing marketing content, which will ensure a more consistent and responsible approach to customer targeting.

6.4.2 Responsible Design: Age-Appropriate Design Code

In addition, when developing digital advertising, social media and influencer marketing campaigns to promote their brands and products, it is recommended that practitioners adhere to four specific standards of the Age-appropriate Design Code introduced in September 2020 by the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) in collaboration with the UK Government. The code has been developed to clarify how children can be protected within the online environment and recognises that children should be given special treatment when it comes to the protection of their data. As such, the code is primarily a data protection code of practice for online services that are likely to be accessed by children, including apps, online games, and web and social media sites (ICO, 2020).

The full code is available online at [ICO.org.uk](https://ico.org.uk) and sets out 15 standards of age-appropriate design, which reflect the ICOs risk-based approach to online harms and current Global Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). The focus of the full code is on providing guidance to companies and platforms to ensure that children have access to digital services, whilst minimising data collection and use (ICO, 2020). Whilst it is considered to be a valuable resource for marketing practitioners, arguably the focus on data protection only addresses part of the problem. More can and should be done to extend the relevant standards to other elements of the online environment. Based on this PhD research, it is recommended that practitioners pay particular attention to the guidance presented in **Standards 1, 3, 4 and 13** of the code when creating commercial content that is likely to be accessed by children. These are shown in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 The Four Most Relevant Standards of the Age-Appropriate Design Code for Child-Targeted Marketing

Standard	Description
<p style="text-align: center;">1. Best Interests of the Child</p> <p>The best interests of the child should be a primary consideration</p>	<p>The concept of the best interests of the child comes from Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child</p>

<p>when you design and develop online services likely to be accessed by a child.</p>	<p>(UNCRC): “In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.”</p>
<p>3. Age-appropriate application</p> <p>Take a risk-based approach to recognising the age of individual users and ensure you effectively apply the standards in this code to child users. Either establish age with a level of certainty that is appropriate to the risks to the rights and freedoms of children that arise from your data processing, or apply the standards in this code to all your users instead.</p>	<p>This means that the age range of your audience and the different needs of children at different ages and stages of development should be at the heart of how you design your service and apply this code.</p>
<p>4. Transparency</p> <p>The privacy information you provide to users, and other published terms, policies and community standards, must be concise, prominent, and in clear language suited to the age of the child. Provide additional specific ‘bite-sized’ explanations about how you use personal data at the point that use is activated.</p>	<p>Transparency is about being clear, open and honest with your users about what they can expect when they access your online service.</p> <p>Transparency is key to the requirement under Article 5(1) of the GDPR to process personal data: “lawfully, fairly and in a transparent manner in relation to the data subject (‘lawfulness, fairness and transparency’)”</p>
<p>13. Nudge Techniques</p> <p>Do not use nudge techniques to lead or encourage children to provide unnecessary personal data or turn off privacy protections.</p>	<p>Nudge techniques are design features which lead or encourage users to follow the designer’s preferred paths in the user’s decision making.</p> <p>For example, presenting a ‘yes’ button far more prominently than the small print ‘no’ option, with the result that the user is ‘nudged’ towards answering ‘yes’ rather than ‘no’ to whatever option is being presented.</p> <p>A further nudge technique involves making one option much less cumbersome or time consuming than the alternative, therefore encouraging many users to just take the easy option. For example providing a low privacy option instantly with just one ‘click’, and the high privacy alternative via a six click mechanism, or with a delay to accessing the service.</p>

(Source: ICO.org.uk, 2020).

6.5 Implications for Research As explained previously, in addition to the theoretical and methodological contributions of this research, this thesis also offers a contribution to research practice.

6.5.1 Using Design-Thinking in the Creative Research Planning Process

This section explains how the key principles of Design Thinking (Figure 3.2) can be applied to the research planning process to aid the development of creative research methods.

The process begins with the ‘Empathise’ stage, which is concerned with learning more about the target audience or end-users (or in the case of a research project; participants).

Understanding more about the participants themselves helps to ensure that research tools are interesting, relevant and appropriate to them. In the second stage; ‘Define’ the focus is on defining the key questions relating to the central problem under investigation. In research terms, this may relate directly to the formation of research questions, which are likely to be influenced by previous research and existing literature and evidence in the field. Next, the ‘Ideate’ phase represents the brainstorming and thought-process behind the development of potential solutions to a problem. Again, in research terms, this can refer to the development of research activities, stimulus materials and tasks. In the fourth stage; ‘Prototype’, engineers will typically develop a prototype or ‘draft’ version of product/machine/process etc based on the insights from the earlier three phases. In parallel with research, this phase can be seen to relate to the development of draft discussion guides, and the initial versions of tasks etc.

Lastly, the ‘Testing’ phase relates directly to the pilot testing phase in a research project, where ideas can be tested with the target participants and amended in light of feedback and issues that arise during this phase. Table 6.1 offers researchers a useful comparison between the Design Thinking approach to innovation (Lewrick et al., 2020) and the creative research planning process.

Table 6.2 Comparison Between the Principles of Design Thinking and Research Planning

Phase	How it is typically understood	How it can be applied in research projects
1. Empathise	Begin by learning more about the target audience or end-users. Q: Who will benefit from a new solution to an existing problem? Q: What issues are important to them?	Begin by learning more about the group/participants under exploration Q: Who will benefit from a new solution to an existing problem? Q: What issues are important to them and why? Q: How can their voices be represented?
2. Define	Focus on defining the key questions relating to the central problem under investigation.	Focus on defining the key research questions based on the understanding of participants and previous literature
3. Ideate	Brainstorm the development of	Brainstorm ways to address the chosen

	potential solutions to the problem	research questions, via the development of stimulus materials and creative, practical, activities and tasks
4. Prototype	Develop a prototype of the ‘solution’ (product/machine/process etc.) for testing	Develop drafts of fieldwork materials (discussion guides, tasks, activities)
5. Test	Test the ‘solution’ with target audience and/or end users to gain feedback	Pilot test ideas and research materials with target participants and to gain feedback for refinement

(Source: Author’s own work).

6.5.2 Justifying Creative Approaches to Research

The growing enthusiasm for creative methods in academic research is certainly encouraging and signifies a positive step forward for the existing community of creative and participatory methods researchers, who have historically struggled to justify the value of their work to their colleagues, particularly within the hard sciences where an emphasis on facts and figures driven by positivist perspectives remains dominant. Returning to an earlier point, positivism as a philosophy tends to fuel unhelpful comparisons between qualitative and quantitative methods, which are typically made in terms of their respective ‘scientific’ quality (Bryman, 2012). To illustrate this point, in theory, the principle of replicability is often considered to be a key indicator of the overall quality of a piece of research (Bryman, 2012). However, in practice, qualitative methods are generally much harder to replicate accurately than quantitative methods (Saunders et al., 2020) which presents a dilemma. For example, when one considers the extra level of complexity involved in research designs like the one introduced in this PhD thesis, where not only were the creative workshops deliberately interactive and dynamic by design, they also involved a group of unpredictable, high spirited and excitable participants and a choice of activities, it is easy to presume that this PhD study would be difficult to replicate exactly in the future.

Indeed, one of the barriers that may dissuade qualitative researchers from conducting creative workshops in their own future studies is that they are not exactly straightforward to facilitate effectively in practice. Unlike other interactive and creative methods that are steadily gaining popularity in qualitative research, for example arts-based methods such as body mapping and expressive dance (Wang, 2017; Luckett and Bagelman, 2023). However, the challenge posed by the complexity of the methodological approach should not be considered to be a weakness of this thesis. On the contrary, this complexity is considered to be a key strength of this PhD

research. The systematic approach to the design of this research has been clearly explained previously in Chapter 3, by breaking it down into each phase of data collection and analysis and elaborating on these explanations with detailed descriptions of the theoretical, methodological and practical aspects underpinning each phase.

6.6 Limitations of this PhD Research

The findings and contributions from this PhD thesis are based on a total of 41 participants in the first phase and 30 participants in the second phase. Whilst this thesis could be considered to rely on a relatively small sample compared to quantitative studies, it is in line with previous, similar qualitative studies with children in this area, where participant numbers have ranged from 11 to 23 participants (Lawlor et al., 2016; Jones and Glynn, 2019). However, it is not necessarily the numbers that are important here. Indeed, high quality research can make a valuable contribution to theory based on the findings of a single case study (e.g. Marsh, 2015). As Edwards (2008, p124) argues, qualitative research should be judged on “the extent to which it can be said that the research has captured important features of the field and has analysed them with integrity”.

Comparisons are often unhelpfully drawn between qualitative and quantitative methods in terms of replicability, which is also considered to be a key indicator of research quality (Denzin, 2017). In practice, qualitative methods can be harder to replicate than quantitative methods. Indeed, the data collection methods adopted in this research are deliberately interactive and dynamic by design, involving a group of participants and a choice of tasks. Whilst it may be harder to replicate a creative workshop than a controlled experiment or a survey, this alone should not lead to the assumption that it is an inferior method. On the contrary, the methodology adopted in this PhD research is regarded as one of its strengths, rather than a weakness.

In theory, qualitative research can, and should be evaluated differently from, rather than compared directly with quantitative research (Tracy, 2010). What is important here is that research is evaluated within the context of the overall approach (Denzin, 2017) and not judged on inappropriate criteria (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). As Guba and Lincoln (1989) propose, the two main goals for qualitative researchers should be trustworthiness and

authenticity. Trustworthiness consists of four criteria as shown in Table 6.3 along with confirmation of how those criteria have been met in this PhD research.

Table 6.3 Components of Research ‘Trustworthiness’

Criteria	How criteria was met in this PhD research
Credibility which parallels internal validity	Use of participants own language
Transferability which parallels external validity	The methodology introduced in this thesis can be adapted for a variety of research topics
Dependability which parallels reliability	Peer, expert reviewers throughout the process
Confirmability which parallels objectivity	Participatory methods, summaries, member checking from phase one to phase two

(Source: Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

The second goal; authenticity, can be achieved with a qualitative methodology that offers a better understanding of social reality, especially when research is conducted within natural settings where social interactions typically take place, such as within a school environment as is the case with this methodology. Nevertheless, arguments in favour of conducting research in natural settings are based upon an assumption that these environments somehow allow researchers to listen to participants’ own accounts of the topic under exploration, which is to say that they have access to social reality itself (Silverman, 2014).

As Alvesson and Kärreman, (2011, p5) describe;

“In interpretive work it is assumed that we can access and study social reality through indications of the meanings and symbolic interactions that are viewed as crucial elements in social communities”

Hence, it must be acknowledged that all accounts of social reality are mediated in some way by participants, therefore all research situations are artificial to some extent (Silverman, 2014). This was managed in this research by using an inquiry-based, pedagogical perspective to inform the design of research tasks that were representative of typical classroom activities and grounded in both marketing and sociological theory.

Elsewhere in consumer research, Spiggle (1994) suggests that qualitative researchers can enhance the rigor and quality of their studies by using a systematic approach and by being transparent about the entire research process. The researcher made every attempt to follow a systematic approach to data collection and analysis as detailed earlier in Chapter 3.

Indeed, it can be somewhat difficult to impose order within exploratory research designs (Stebbins, 2001). Yet the researcher addressed this challenge by adopting an iterative approach to each phase of the research. The researcher used the literature review, conceptual framework (Figure 2.2) and content analysis as the basis for semi-structuring the creative workshop discussion guides and practical tasks. The researcher was also able to test the suitability and relevance of these materials prior to commencing the fieldwork by undertaking a pilot study with children who were the same age as potential participants and younger and by consulting with an educational professional.

In the second phase of fieldwork, the researcher also incorporated the findings from the workshops as a basis for the interview schedules. This provided a clear structure which enabled the researcher to maintain consistency in the overall approach, but also retain some flexibility to be true to the exploratory design. The validity of this structure is enhanced because it emerged as the project progressed. The researcher was able to check and verify underlying constructs and emergent ideas throughout the process by referring back to the literature, which was guided by the conceptual framework (Figure 2.2). Furthermore, involving the same group of participants in both phases of fieldwork ($n = 41$ in phase 1 and $n = 30$ in phase 2) also enabled the researcher to verify, refine and confirm findings with the participants during the analysis. Hence, consistency was maintained throughout the research both prior to data collection and after data analysis. Where such consistency is achieved in qualitative research it also enhances the reliability of findings (Tracy, 2010) because the stages of research are easily identifiable, which is an important hallmark of transparency.

Furthermore, the use of visual presentations of data (as displayed in Figures 3.3 - 3.5 & 4.1 - 4.4) also gives the researcher an opportunity to demonstrate to the reader how data has been interpreted and synthesised throughout. Visualisations from CAQDAS software such as NVivo Pro, helps to illustrate the various connections in the raw data, highlighting the separate coding cycles and the evolution of descriptive codes to analytical codes and the development of themes. It is a particular strength when themes emerge from data based on children's reflections of their particular contexts or experiences (Nairn and Clarke, 2011;

Mac Naughton, Rolfe and Siraj-Blatchford, 2008), as is the case in this thesis, thus enhancing the overall quality of the research. (Vaismoradi and Snelgrove, 2019).

6.7 Evaluating the Overall Success of this Research

This section explains how this project has met the research objectives. For ease of reference for the reader, the original objectives are reproduced below:

6.7.1 Research Objectives:

- To explore children's awareness and perceptions of contemporary advertising formats (RQ1)
- To explore the nature of children's advertising literacy from a sociological perspective as a guide for future decisions on advertising policy, responsible advertising practice and ethically-grounded regulations (RQ2 and RQ3)
- To develop a conceptual framework of children's advertising literacy, which can be used to guide future research in the context of the contemporary media environment (RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3).

This PhD thesis has clearly demonstrated a robust strategy to achieve each of these objectives. Based on the motivation to explore an alternative approach to the study of children's advertising literacy, the first objective was *To explore children's awareness and perceptions of contemporary advertising formats* by enabling the researcher to undertake an academic marketing research project that was aligned with the way children's marketers operate. That is, to make a conscious effort to 'get to know' the participants as young consumers, to acknowledge, appreciate and represent their consumer voices. As noted earlier, this objective was also a specific reflection of the calls for new advertising literacy research that considers the content of contemporary advertising formats (De Pauw, De Wolf, Hudders and Cauberghe, 2018; van Dam and van Reijmersdal, 2019) and how these insights can enhance existing theory (Malmelin, 2016).

By adopting an interdisciplinary approach (specifically reflected in Research Questions 1 and 3), this entire research project has benefited from drawing upon sociological perspectives of children's consumption. The second objective;

RO2 - To explore the nature of children's advertising literacy from a sociological perspective as a guide for future decisions on advertising policy, ethically-grounded regulations and responsible advertising practice, has been achieved through the presentation of the main arguments in this thesis, that an appreciation of children's culture is a fundamental aspect of understanding how marketing impacts children and young people.

Finally, the third objective; *RO3 - To develop a nuanced framework for children's advertising literacy in the contemporary media environment to guide future research* has also been achieved with the introduction of the Layers of Literacy Framework (Figure 5.1) in the previous Chapter. Whilst this framework is conceptual at this stage, it is grounded in the data analysed in the current PhD study as well as evidence provided by both existing empirical and conceptual research (Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008; Buijzen et al., 2010; Lawlor et al., 2016; Hudders et al., 2017).

6.8 Suggestions for Future Research

As with all research projects that have a limited timeframe, the suggestions presented in this PhD thesis are based upon insights from a specific snapshot in time (2019 – 2023).

Nevertheless, recognising that further technological developments within the contemporary media environment are inevitable, this thesis suggests that advertising literacy researchers should continue to explore advertising techniques and persuasive communications tactics as they evolve (Livingstone and Helpser, 2006; Nairn, Griffin and Wicks, 2008; Rozendaal et al., 2011; Nelson, 2018; Lapierre, 2019; Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2023).

Indeed, over the course of this PhD research, it became increasingly apparent that commercialisation continues to infiltrate new corners of the metaverse in line with changing trends in children's media use, leading to a further blurring of the boundaries between the commercialised and entertainment content to which children are exposed in their everyday lives as reiterated through this thesis (Dwivedi et al., 2022; Rozendaal and Buijzen, 2023). Hence, this thesis highlights three emerging advertising formats as interesting topics for future exploration in Section 6.8.3. In addition, this thesis also proposes two aspects of children's advertising literacy theory that warrant further examination outlined in Section 6.8.1 and 6.8.2 below.

6.8.1 Children's 'Critical Responses' to Advertising

The first suggestion relates to attitudinal dimensions of advertising literacy and the need for more research into what constitutes a 'critical attitude' towards advertising. Future research could benefit from building upon this PhD's findings by making a distinction between attitudes towards advertising *as a practice* and attitudes towards *different advertising characteristics*. Qualitative studies could facilitate the exploration of the concept of 'critical responses' in more depth by analysing the specific characteristics discussed throughout this PhD thesis relating to content, message, product and source (Table 2.8). Alternatively, quantitative methodologies could allow researchers to create new constructs of 'critical attitude' by investigating the importance and relevance of different advertising characteristics and potentially develop scales to measure these constructs.

There is a preference for implicit advertising in the contemporary media environment, which is used "as a device that renders normal...associations that would seem incongruous were they made explicit" (Hackley and Hackley, 2022, p85). In other words, advertisers are

choosing formats such as product placement and influencer marketing because they are very effective in making associations between brands and positive experiences appear natural or “normal.”. By being subtle, these associations might be perceived as less forced or “incongruous” than they would if the underlying selling and persuasive intent of the advertisement was more obvious or explicit. This type of advertising blends seamlessly with media content (Freeman and Shapiro, 2014; Sweeney et al., 2021), influencing consumers’ perceptions in ways that feel organic. Understandably, this reinforces existing ethical concerns regarding children’s exposure to misleading or deceptive advertising techniques. Although, as the findings of this research have indicated, participants demonstrated quite a robust and resilient way of coping with advertisements and a nonchalant attitude towards the potential effects on them, which may lead them to associate brands with certain desirable subcultures, lifestyles or values without ever realising that they are being exposed to commercially-motivated content.

What is most relevant in terms of this thesis is the overarching viewpoint of Consumer Culture Theory, which is that consumers do not act in isolation (Goulding, Shankar and Canniford, 2013). According to Mitchell and Imrie, (2011, p40) it is possible “to link social context with consumption to understand “real” consumers”. In the days before the Internet, where it is likely that children would recognise commercially-motivated content and know when they were being exposed to advertising commercials were clearly demarcated from other media content, children would likely recognise when exposed to it and have some level of awareness that they were being advertised to (Schor, 2005, p189).

6.8.2 Unwanted effects of Advertising

Nevertheless, long-standing concerns relating to the negative consequences of children’s exposure to advertising remain a priority issue on the socio-political agenda and an area of concern amongst parents and other adults who have a professional responsibility for the health and wellbeing of children within the community, such as teachers, social workers and educational psychologists. Furthermore, questions surrounding what constitutes acceptable, fair and appropriate advertising to children persist amongst academics and regulators alike (Section 1.1). It is interesting to note that children do not appear to share these same concerns regarding the consequences of advertising exposure, nor do they care if they are deliberately targeted by marketers. Lawlor et al., (2016) also validated that brand associations online can serve as a form of self-expression and as a way of presenting a socially acceptable image

online. Yet, to the researcher's best knowledge, these concepts have not yet been applied elsewhere in children's advertising literacy research. Therefore, more research into 'unwanted effects' and the unintended consequences of advertising exposure might be beneficial in balancing the field of advertising literacy research. There may also be an opportunity here for future research into children's positive attitudes towards advertising in terms of their appeal, perceived relevance, trustworthiness and credibility as a way of improving advertising literacy.

Therefore, it is hoped that the Layers of Literacy Framework (Figure 5.1) will enable researchers to undertake studies that help to reframe the debate surrounding the commercialisation of childhood, and further enhance advertising literacy definitions that are primarily based on historical 'ages and stages' theories of children's psychological development and more traditional forms of advertising.

The Layers of Literacy Framework is well suited to future studies into embedded advertising formats because it enables researchers to explore 'critical responses' to advertising in the absence of recognition by also considering children's attitudinal and evaluative responses to advertising characteristics, even for newer forms of advertising where children may lack conceptual knowledge. This was particularly evident with TikTok, which was identified by this PhD research as a social media platform with a considerable presence in children's lives and a significant user base of preadolescent children despite the app's current recommended user age of 13 years. Research on children's engagement with TikTok content and the ways in which the app's algorithms optimise the commercialisation of its features is sparse compared to other digital channels.

6.8.3. Embedded Advertising Formats

On this point, three interesting avenues for future advertising literacy research into embedded formats are suggested;

- In-game advertising and brand placement
- Virtual worlds and Virtual Marketplaces
- Branded lenses in instant messaging apps and social media, e.g. Snapchat & TikTok

6.8.3.1 In-game Advertising and Brand Placement

Within many modern video games and apps, children can make purchases within the game either directly or through an external platform such as Google Play. The cost of such

purchases ranges from low value items that may boost performance or skip waiting times, to high value items such as an expansion pack or bundle of in-game currency (e.g. Robux). Currency can be earned within the game but this is rare. Basic currency allows players to experience a somewhat limited version of the game. Therefore, as evidenced by the findings of this research, there is a strong pull towards ‘premium currency’, which is usually only available through purchases made with real money. Premium currency allows players to acquire higher value items that enhance the gameplay. Increasingly, small amounts of premium currency can be ‘earned’ by watching video advertisements within the game (CAP, 2021).

In addition, players are often exposed to in-game promotions for random item purchases also known as ‘loot boxes’ (Zendle and Cairns, 2019). Loot boxes function in a similar way to a lucky dip, in that the player plays for a chance to ‘win’ or open a virtual box, which contains a number of digital items with varying in-game values (Zendle and Cairns, 2019). Players know that they will receive a certain amount of items but will not know how desirable they will be. Some games show players which items are inside a loot box prior to purchase, while others simply show the odds of receiving various rarity items (CAP, 2021). One of the key concerns regarding the presence of loot boxes within children’s games is whether or not it can, or should be considered as a licensable gambling activity (Gambling Commission, 2020). Similar to gambling, the randomness and potential for high-value rewards can be addictive. Limited-time events and exclusive items create urgency and pressure to spend based on the FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) effect. Furthermore, it could be argued that displaying odds is not the most effective or appropriate way to inform young players about what they are spending their money on.

Participants explained that there is a shared format to the way such items are classified across online games like Robux and Fortnite. This ‘Hierarchy of Value’ typically ranges from Common (low value) - Uncommon - Rare - Ultra Rare - Legendary (high value). Some items are simply for aesthetic purposes. The findings of this research support the evidence that Gacha mechanisms in particular are becoming a prevalent and lucrative aspect of many mobile and online games, providing a mix of excitement and frustration due to their randomised nature. While they can enhance gameplay and provide financial support for game developers, the ethical and psychological implications necessitate careful consideration and

regulation to protect players, especially vulnerable groups like children and individuals prone to addiction.

As also evidenced in this research, participants were aware that they could purchase digital clothing, accessories and ‘skins’ to customise their avatars. Indeed, as shown in images 5.1 and 5.2 earlier, players can also choose to purchase branded items for their avatars. This brand placement within video games is also a common occurrence (Vyvey, Castellar and van Looy, 2018), yet it is also one of the most subtle aspects of commercialisation of the online environment. In this way, they can promote their favourite brands and products to their friends and other players, perhaps without even realising it. Unlike other online “advertisements”, the integration of brands into online games does not reduce the functionality of the game in the same way as the more obvious forms of online advertising such as pop-up advertisements, pre-roll and mid-roll advertisements do. This may explain why it does not yet appear to be subject to the same negative attitudes and why it is not readily recognised as a form of advertising by children. As in-game advertising is becoming a common feature of the online games and apps that children are spending increasing amounts of time playing (CAP, 2021) it presents a potential avenue for future research. There is a need for future research to explore children’s perceptions of the brands that feature prominently in popular online games and apps. These PhD findings indicate that it is likely that children will demonstrate a preference for these brands, which may spill over into their consumption of products and services in the real world. This assumption should be considered in order to examine ways to encourage more critical responses to brand placement. Future research may also wish to explore the links between gaming and advertising in more depth. Particularly children’s understanding of the ways these in-game ‘add-ons’ (e.g. currency, loot boxes, aesthetic items) are promoted as well as their perceptions of value for money of the promoted items.

6.8.3.2 Virtual Worlds and Virtual Marketplaces

Another interesting insight from this PhD research relates specifically to the games Roblox and Fortnite in terms of uncovering the existence of their associated marketplaces. For example, in Roblox, players can request to trade with other players of the game who are online at the same time. These trades allow children to mutually agree on an exchange of game items, (e.g. vehicles, pets and accessories). Essentially, the game has no defined end point, gameplay is centred around the acquisition of more items and the upgrading of existing

items which increases players' negotiating and bargaining power in trades. Roblox developers maintain children's interest in the game by periodically bringing out "new" types of items for acquisition. When a specific type of item is no longer available within the game the "value" of previous items increases significantly, much like in the real marketplace. No real money is traded, however as shown by these findings, children regularly spend money on Robux (i.e. in-game currency). It appears that there is a shared assumption that the most desirable in-game items can only be acquired by making additional purchases. In terms of existing advertising literacy research, to the researcher's best knowledge, there are no studies which examine advertising literacy in the context of virtual marketplaces. As noted earlier, there is a lack of research into advertising literacy in situ (Sweeney et al., 2021) and on balance these studies focus on behavioural outcomes in real-life settings. Therefore, future research may wish to explore children's behaviour in virtual marketplaces both as an avenue of interest in its own right and also as a way of understanding more about children's consumer behaviour in the real-world environment. Such research may help to enhance knowledge regarding the moral dimension of advertising literacy.

6.8.3 Branded Lenses on Instant Messaging apps and Social Media

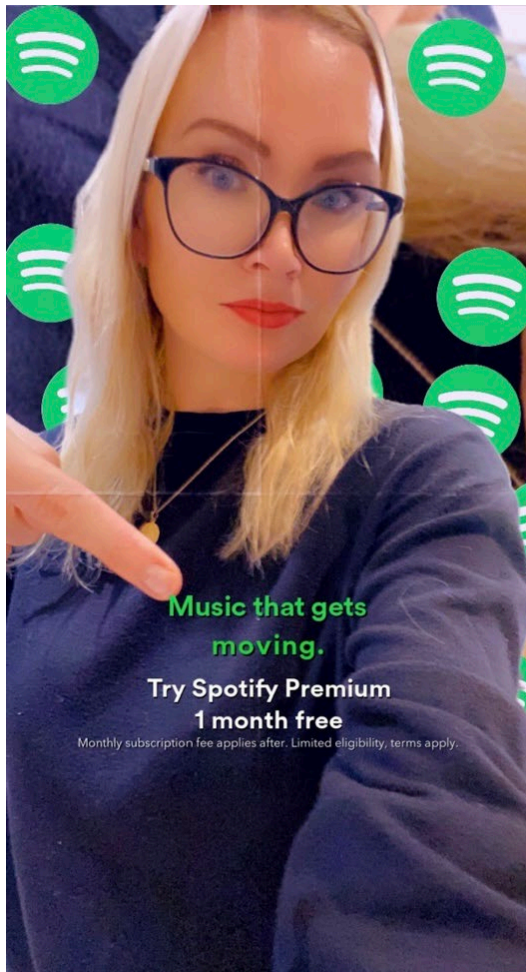
The third area of interest for future research concerns the infiltration of brands into instant messaging apps such as Snapchat. Snapchat use is widespread amongst children in the UK who prefer it to ordinary messaging services available on their mobile devices. According to Sridhar, (2023), 90% of 13 - 24 year olds in the UK choose to communicate with their friends via Snapchat. One of the key features of Snapchat is the ability to alter photos and videos using 'filters' or lenses. Increasingly brands are creating their own lenses within the app, for example the fast-food brand; McDonalds and the music streaming service; Spotify (see image 6.1 and 6.2).

Image 6.1 Halloween-Themed McDonald's Snapchat Lens



(Source: Author).

Image 6.2 Spotify-Branded Snapchat Lens



(Source: Author).

Quite often, branded lenses and filters will also contain a call to action in much the same way as a traditional advertisement. For example, “Try Spotify Premium 1 month free” as shown in Image 6.2. Therefore, children may be exposed to a wide variety of brands, which may or may not be appropriate. This brand infiltration further emphasises the ever-increasing commercialisation of the online environment. However, there are currently no restrictions on the type of brand that can create a lens on Snapchat. There is also very little regulation in terms of ‘opportunities to see’ these brands and advertisements. This is concerning when considered alongside the way that these apps work. For instance, Snapchat has a “Snapstreak” feature that scores a user for the number of consecutive days they share a picture with each contact, which encourages them to be available on the app constantly (Sridhar, 2023) and therefore potentially in contact with commercially-motivated content constantly too. This PhD research has highlighted the difficulty in exploring children’s understanding of embedded advertising without priming their responses in some way (i.e.

without first disclosing that they are a form of advertising). This is reflected in a lack of research and evidence regarding the best ways to alert to the underlying commercial agenda of these embedded formats. However, the use of clear brand identifiers (such as the brand name, logo and trademarks shown in Image 6.1 & 6.2) should in theory make the commercial intent easier to recognise. Despite this, there is still a need to test this assumption in future research with children. In addition, only few studies have elaborated on how children process embedded advertising (De Jans et al., 2018). As argued throughout this thesis, advertising literacy studies should not only focus on recognition of commercial intent as the only indicator of advertising literacy. Even though branded lenses such as the examples shown here may be easier to recognise, it is still unclear how these are perceived by children and how they are evaluated. It is also unclear if these lenses are used by children as a form of self-expression, similar to the ways that children associate with brands on social media as examined in Lawlor et al.,'s (2016) study. There is also the potential for filters and lenses to act as a form of peer-to-peer promotion (Marsh, 2015) if children choose to share 'branded' images of themselves with others in their networks. Branded filters and lenses can become popular among peer groups, which may create social pressure to use them. The findings of this research suggest that the use of branded filters by influencers or popular accounts may drive trends and subtly promote products, contributing to consumer culture amongst children and their peers. Future advertising literacy research should consider strategies for enabling children to manage this pressure and make independent decisions about engaging with branded content.

In terms of practice and policy, there is an opportunity for future research to test the efficacy of 'ad-blocking' or filtering tools, which may help children identify and filter out branded content, or at least flag it as advertising, and how this can support their advertising literacy. Lastly, future research may wish to explore children's perceptions of branded lenses and examine the efficacy of them as another form of online advertising.

6.9 Conclusions Chapter Summary

As highlighted at the very beginning of this thesis, scholars from across the world continue to add fuel to the debate surrounding children's understanding of advertising. It is clear that children's advertising research has evolved from its roots in cognitive developmental psychology and original focus on television advertising to a field that now encompasses a

broad range of digital and interactive media. Despite this, there are certain aspects of advertising research that have hardly changed over the last 50 years (Cotte, 2024). For example, today's advertising literacy scholars are still seeking answers to the same questions posed by researchers in the 1970s. For instance, there are clear similarities between this PhD research and the very first articles published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* (JCR) primarily focused on the "concerns about consumption and persuasion in children and families...with articles on children and advertising persuasion (Goldberg and Gorn 1974; Robertson and Rossiter 1974) and overall consumer socialisation (Aldous and McLeod 1974; Ward 1974)" (Cotte, 2024, p52). These issues have retained a long-standing presence on research agendas over the last 50 years and are still attracting academic attention today and for some, this provides evidence that "there is always more work to be done!" within the field of advertising research (Cotte, 2024, p53).

As outlined in earlier in this thesis, it is evident that those who hold the responsibility for advertising regulation in the UK (and indeed across the world) remain focused on addressing the issue of the ever-expanding presence of contemporary marketing in children's lives, whilst also recognising the theoretical and practical challenges that this presents (Nelson, 2018). As such, it is understandable that the concerns raised by these issues and their potential negative impacts on children has culminated in calls for new, up-to-date research that revisits existing conceptualisations of children's advertising literacy that a), predominantly rely on the cognitive recognition of advertising in some form (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012) in response to the increasing ubiquity of embedded persuasion formats that permeate the media environment but are much harder to recognise (Hudders et al., 2017; Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, 2018). And b), revisits conceptualisations of advertising literacy that are based upon research into more traditional marketing formats such as television advertising (Buijzen et al., 2010; Nelson, 2018).

This shift in emphasis is primarily a response to the significant changes to children's media lifestyles (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012; Panic et al., 2013; De Jans et al., 2017; Nelson, 2019) as they continue to eschew more traditional forms of entertainment, such as watching television (Zarouali et al., 2018) and playing with physical toys (Jaakkola, 2019) in favour of connecting with the world via their own electronic devices (De Jans et al., 2018; De Vierman et al., 2019). As such, this PhD project, which explores children's advertising literacy in the

contemporary media environment, is considered to address an important and worthwhile topic.

One of the most significant challenges for children's advertising literacy scholars is keeping up with the pace of change within the contemporary media environment (Buijzen et al., 2010; De Jans et al., 2017). Whilst this is by no means a new issue, perhaps it warrants greater consideration by researchers in future advertising literacy studies. For example, back in 2018 academic research into advertising on TikTok was non-existent, which meant that there was a real opportunity for this PhD to be amongst the first studies to explore this emerging area, with the potential to make at least one original contribution to knowledge by examining advertising on video-sharing platforms. In the six years it has taken to complete this work, there has been a significant increase in academic research into advertising on TikTok. It is true that there are lengthy timescales involved in the preparation and submission of quality manuscripts to journals, not least because the peer review process and subsequent revision of manuscripts is often time consuming and unpredictable. Hence, there is always a risk that even the most cutting-edge research might be outdated by the time it is published.

On the contrary, the advertising industry has adapted relatively well to the changing digital landscape over the last 20 years (Kotler et al., 2017). Even in the absence of any significant changes to the original questions that remain, to some extent, unanswered after five decades of children's advertising literacy research (Cotte, 2024), it is safe to say that there will be no shortage of opportunities for new studies to enhance the body of advertising knowledge in the years to come. It is also likely that the demand for evidence-based advertising policies and regulations within the industry will continue. In terms of future research, scholars need to recognise that advertising is a topic that demands to be continually revisited to reflect the fact that terms and concepts are continually shifting. However, when doing so, researchers should exercise caution to avoid falling into the trap of 'reinventing the wheel', whereby the old is simply restated as the new (Shaw, 2009). The use of different terms to express similar advertising concepts or similar terms to express different concepts hinders the development of theory. The result is a "semantic jungle of confusion", which makes it more difficult for advertising researchers to construct a solid theoretical foundation for their work (Shaw, 2009, p331).

Researchers should familiarise themselves with the historical advertising literacy literature as it may uncover ideas that are relevant to their particular study but not immediately obvious

(Shaw, 2009). This approach was adopted in this PhD research, whereby the origins of advertising literacy theory were traced back to the 1960s. Not only did this minimise the risk of ‘reinventing the wheel’, it provided a deeper understanding of research on children and advertising overall. This helped to illuminate the most significant and dominant ideas within the field and the reasoning behind them. Revisiting historical literature enabled the researcher to see how certain ideas have evolved over time as a result of different adaptations and extensions. Most importantly, reviewing a vast body of literature from both advertising and sociology provided the “critical ingredients.. to build concepts into constructs and constructs into theory” (Shaw, 2009, p331).

In other words, it shaped the development of the initial version of the conceptual framework introduced in Figure 6.1. This framework was developed in the early stages of this PhD research where first and foremost it allowed the researcher to visualise the overall scope of the PhD project and subsequently draw boundaries around the research (to avoid covering too much ground). Despite being purely conceptual, this initial framework helped the researcher identify the intersections between two disciplines and determine under-researched areas where qualitative insights into children’s own perspectives could contribute to existing advertising literacy theory and balance the quantitative studies that dominate the discipline (Sigirci et al., 2022). In that respect, this PhD research helps to shape future interventions and educational strategies that may mitigate the negative impacts of advertising on children. Furthermore, these findings may also contribute to the improvement of responsible advertising practices, regulations and policies in the UK.

Future research should continue to examine the increasing variety and sophistication of advertising techniques as they emerge. As noted earlier, despite the evolution in advertising tactics over the last twenty years and subsequent academic attention on the topic (Eisend, 2015; Hackley and Hackley, 2022) researchers have not yet agreed upon a comprehensive definition of advertising (Kerr and Schultz, 2010; Dahlen and Rosengren, 2016). Hence, there are calls for new research that can assist the development of a revised definition of advertising, one that better reflects the fragmented nature of the contemporary media environment and the multitude of communications formats that exist within it (Kerr and Schultz 2010; Carlson 2015; Faber 2015).

This PhD research addresses these calls in part by acknowledging the difficulties in reaching a consensus on how best to conceptualise advertising as it exists today in its various forms

(Kerr and Schultz, 2010; Dahlen and Rosengren, 2016; Hackley and Hackley, 2022). This poses a challenge for scholars across the entire field of advertising research, not just those working within the remit of advertising literacy. In one respect, logic dictates that it makes sense for advertising definitions to evolve in line with current technological developments and continue to do so as and when new advancements emerge in the future (Dahlen and Rosengren, 2016). A definition of advertising that transcends format and can be applied in a broad range of studies would certainly be beneficial for researchers, both in terms of clarifying existing ambiguities in terminology and ensuring a level of consistency in the measurement of constructs.

So why does it still not exist?

Perhaps it is because identifying an appropriate definition of advertising is a complex task in both a theoretical and practical sense. To some extent, the PCMC model proposed by Buijzen et al., (2010) demonstrates an attempt to circumvent this issue by focusing on the fundamentals of persuasion processing, whilst also considering some of the most common features of commercialised media content that are non-format specific, such as the level of integration between the content and the context within which it appears. However, despite its merits and the strength of its theoretical basis, the PCMC model has generally been overlooked in children's advertising literacy research, even in the subsequent studies conducted by the original authors.

On the one hand, there is a strong case in support of broadening the scope of advertising definitions to include a wider range of persuasive tactics and techniques (Richards and Curran, 2002). Indeed, the findings of this PhD research also support this argument by providing additional empirical evidence that children do appear to have a tendency to categorise all commercially-motivated communications techniques as a form of 'advertising' (Malmelin, 2010).

Nevertheless, developing a 'universal' definition of advertising that better reflects the integrated nature of the contemporary media environment would at the very least, require a lack of consideration or a certain degree of neglect concerning the inherent differences in the form, style and substance of advertisements. [This contradicts a viewpoint shared by some scholars, who believe that in theory, advertising should always be regarded as a distinct

promotional strategy, one that is separate from all other elements of the marketing communications mix (Hackley and Hackley, 2022).

Alternatively, researchers could work towards developing multiple definitions of advertising that could be tailored to specific types of format, tactics or media channels. Whilst this might seem like a workable solution that accounts for the differences in form, style and substance, it might also be problematic in future research. Given the nature of the contemporary media environment, it is likely that the evolution of advertising techniques will continue into the foreseeable future (Hackley and Hackley, 2022). Therefore, whilst there is potential to broaden the scope of ‘advertising’, it is perhaps a risky strategy that might restrict definitions of specific types of advertising as they exist at specific points in time. Whereas in practice, advertisers readily adapt promotional strategies in response to new advances in technology and changes in consumer trends in real time. To do so would result in the development of advertising theory that has a limited window of relevance, reducing its value in terms of advancing knowledge within the field. However, it is worth noting that advances in advertising literacy research do appear to be following a tailored approach to defining advertising literacy in terms of specific types of ‘advertising’, such as advergames (Waiguny et al., 2014), native advertising (Wojdyski and Evans, 2016), digital advertising (van Reijmersdal and Rozendaal, 2020), vlogs (Hoek et al., 2020) and influencer marketing (De Jans et al., 2018).

As noted previously, advertising has historically been defined in the terms of neo-classical economic theory, that is as a one-way, didactic form of communication between messenger and receiver. This is reflected in the ‘push’ format of traditional communications channels such as print, radio and television advertising. These definitions assume that the messenger’s underlying intent to sell and persuade is explicit, which helps the receiver distinguish the communication as a form of advertisement, as opposed to another form of media (Leiss, Kline and Jhally, 1990). Hence, it is somewhat remarkable that very few advertising literacy researchers have actually acknowledged the fact that the definition of advertising has not been discussed to any significant extent over the last 50 years (Nan and Faber, 2004; Kerr and Schultz, 2010). A significant amount of advertising literacy studies are based upon definitions of advertising that still closely resemble those introduced in the 1920s (Dahlen and Rosengren, 2016).

This thesis introduces a conceptualisation of advertising upon the Layers of Literacy Framework is based (Figure 5.1). It should be acknowledged that this is a working conceptualisation that has not been empirically tested or validated. Therefore, it should remain a priority for future researchers to continue to work towards a conceptualisation of advertising that is theoretically sound, but which also retains some flexibility to accommodate future shifts in the media landscape and changes in consumer trends.

In conclusion, future advertising literacy researchers must pay attention to the ways in which marketing practitioners intuitively capitalise on the fascinating nature of children's culture, how they capture children's imaginations and how they foster brand advocacy and long-term relationships with young consumers. Future research should not overlook the potential impact and influence of the media environment on children's knowledge of the marketplace (Nelson and McLeod, 2005; Buckingham, 2007; Buckingham and Tingstad, 2014) their understanding of how commercialisation works (Moses and Baldwin, 2005) and ultimately how they 'read' contemporary advertising attempts in practice (Friestad and Wright, 1994; Rozendaal et al., 2011; Hudders et al., 2017; Leiss et al., 2018; Hackley and Hackley, 2022). By pursuing these future directions, researchers can contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of children's advertising literacy, ultimately leading to more effective educational strategies, policies, and interventions that empower children to navigate the complex digital advertising landscape safely and critically.

7.0 References

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Appendices

Appendix A: Information sheet



Research title: *The development of advertising literacy: An investigation of children's ability to understand different marketing formats and the implications for marketing practitioners and policy makers*

Date: June 2021

Project background and participant information

What is happening?

Your child has been invited to participate in a research project conducted by Sheli Smith, a fully-DBS checked Doctoral Researcher in Marketing from Sheffield University Management School. Please take time to read the following information carefully and feel free to email Sheli with any questions if anything is unclear or if you would like more information on any aspect of the study (contact details are below).

Why is it happening?

The aim of this project is to explore children's advertising literacy within the contemporary marketing environment. What this means is that I am interested in learning more about what children think about advertising and marketing as it is today, because it has changed so much over the last 30 years or so. Children's lives are becoming more digital, and as they spend more time online it is important for researchers like me to understand what they think about the content they are consuming (watching, sharing, creating) for example, gaming videos, beauty tutorials and toy unboxing videos. Online advertising is not currently regulated in the same way as television advertising, so it's important to find out more through research with children themselves, so that recommendations for socially responsible advertising in the UK can be made.

Does my child have to take part?

No. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to allow your child to take part. If you are happy for them to participate will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form, which is available separately. Even if you consent at this point you may still choose to withdraw your child at any time from the research. You do not have to give a reason.

When is it happening?

Children will take part in a workshop within school time lasting approximately 45 – 60 minutes. The workshops are designed to be fun and children will be asked to take part in creative activities, such as having a go at designing some advertisements. All discussions will be guided by the children themselves and the activities will be age-appropriate. All workshops are completely confidential and your child's identity will be protected at all times throughout the research.

What happens during the research?

Children will be asked questions as a group about their social media use, their awareness of advertising online and their opinions of different marketing materials. The workshops will be audio-recorded so that I can listen back and write down what has been discussed. All data will be anonymised, which means that no real names will be used. The recordings made during this research will only be used for analysis as part of my PhD research and for no other purpose or publication. I will ensure that no other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one other than myself and my research supervisors will be allowed access to the original recordings.

What happens afterwards?

Following completion of the project in 2022, findings from the research may be used in part for publication in research journals, and may be used to help inform governmental policy guidelines to help regulate the advertising industry in the UK. Therefore, I ask you to consent to transferring the copyright of data from you as an individual to the University of Sheffield (on the separate consent form). Transferring copyright means that if someone wishes to use or reproduce the research in the future, they would need to seek permission to do this from the University rather than from you as an individual.

Additional GDPR information:

New data protection legislation came into effect across the UK on 25 May 2018; this means that I need to provide you with some further information relating to how your personal information will be used and managed within this research project. This is in addition to the details provided within this information sheet.

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. In order to collect and use your personal information as part of this research project, we must have a basis in law to do so. The basis that we are using is that the research is 'a task in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information, including details about how and why the University processes your personal information, how we keep your information secure, and your legal rights (including how to complain if you feel that your personal information has not been handled correctly), can be found in the University's Privacy Notice <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>.

All of the information collected about you/your child during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to members of the research team. You/your child will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications unless you have given your explicit consent for this. The data collected will be anonymised and used to develop reports and journal articles. It will be encrypted and stored on a password-protected drive and destroyed within a year of any final publications relating to the project being accepted.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet. If you have any questions, please contact the lead researcher; Sheli Smith (details below).

Project contact details for further information:

Lead Researcher: Sheli Smith | sheli.smith@sheffield.ac.uk | 07789558948 | Sheffield University Management School, Conduit Road, Sheffield S10 1FL | Supervisors: Dr. Caroline Oates c.j.oates@sheffield.ac.uk and Prof. Fraser McLeay fraser.mcleay@sheffield.ac.uk
Research Support Officer (Management School) Sophie May s.may@sheffield.ac.uk

Appendix B: Participant & Parent Consent Form



Research title: Exploring socio-contextual influences on children’s marketing literacy in the contemporary media environment

Participant Consent Form

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	Yes	No
Taking Part in the Project		
Parent: I have read and understood the project information sheet dated June 2021 or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question, please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parent: I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parent: I agree to allow my child to take part in the project. I understand that this means that my child will take part in a workshop at school, do some practical activities and that my child will be asked to talk about advertising and social media in a small group.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parent: I agree that the research sessions with my child can be audio-recorded so that they can be written up by the researcher afterwards	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Child: I agree that the words I say during the workshop and group interview can be recorded	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parent: I understand that taking part is voluntary and that I can decide not to allow my child take part in the workshop at any time. I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want them to take part.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Child: I understand that I don’t have to take part in this research if I don’t want to and I can tell my teacher at any time that I don’t want to take part and I will not get into trouble.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
How my information will be used during and after the project		
Parent: I understand that personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. (if collected) will not be revealed to people outside the research project.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Child: I understand and agree that my words and drawings may be quoted (used) in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that my real name will not be used in these.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parent: I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to the data from this research only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parent: I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my child’s data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parent: I give permission for the data collected to be deposited in a data repository so it can be used for future research and learning.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
Parent: I agree to assign the copyright held in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield. (See information sheet for more details on what this means).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of Parent [printed]

Signature

Date

Name of Child Participant [printed]

Name of Researcher [printed]

Signature

Date

Project contact details for further information:

Lead Researcher: Sheli Smith | sheli.smith@sheffield.ac.uk | 07789558948 | Sheffield University Management School, Conduit Road, Sheffield S10 1FL | Supervisors Dr. Caroline Oates c.oates@sheffield.ac.uk and Prof. Fraser McLeay fraser.mcleay@sheffield.ac.uk

Appendix C: YouTube Task

Task:

Imagine you and your friends are YouTubers

Choose **one** of the brands from our Graffiti wall

Can you and your group come up with a cool idea for a YouTube video that would persuade the rest of the class to try or buy the brand that you have chosen?

Think about:

- The videos that you like to watch
- What do you like and dislike about them?
- Videos you share with your friends
- Videos you have made yourself if you have done this before
- Have you bought anything or tried something new after seeing it on YouTube?

Use the worksheet and storyboard to help you plan your video.

Have fun!

Appendix D: YouTube Worksheet

YouTube worksheet

What sort of brand is it?	Food/Drink	Toy	Fashion	Beauty	Game	Sport	Music
Who will be in the video? Are they already a famous YouTuber or is it someone you know?							
What sort of video do you want to make?	Challenge	Review	Day in the life	Unboxing	Gaming walkthrough	Music	
What will they do in the video? What is the story?							
What will the YouTuber say? Think about a short script							
How will you include the brand in the video?							

Appendix E: Packaging Design Task

Task:

Imagine you and your friends are Designers

Choose **one** of the products from our Graffiti wall or Value Trolley

Can you and your group come up with a cool idea for some new packaging or a sign/special offer that would make your chosen product stand out more to kids like you in the supermarket or shop?

Think about:

- The things you like to buy when you are out shopping
- What do you like and dislike about them?
- Have you asked for or tried something new because it had something on the packet that you really like?
- Any special offers or special prices you could add to make it seem like a good deal
- Anything else you would like to add - movie/TV/gaming characters, famous people, cartoons, colours, shapes, you can be as creative as you like.

Use the templates to help you design your new packaging. Have fun!

Appendix F: Graffiti Wall Brands: Full List

Brand	Category	Workshop 1	Workshop 2	Workshop 3	Quotes
Cinch	Automotive Finance	Yes			"it's like not all one thing it's multiple brands"
BMW	Automotive	Yes	Yes		"I think a brand is a type of thing like an electronic or cars"
PlayStation	Gaming	Yes			"I think a brand is like a company that advertises stuff on the TV and other stuff"
Nike	Sportswear	Yes	Yes	Yes	
McDonald's	Food	Yes	Yes	Yes	"Happy meals from McDonalds"
Sports Direct	Sportswear	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Next	Clothing/Homeware	Yes			
Asda	Groceries	Yes			
M&S	Groceries	Yes	Yes		
Vodafone	Technology	Yes			
Hotwheels	Toys	Yes			
Off white	Designer	Yes			
Balenciaga	Designer	Yes			
Amazon	Technology	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Adidas	Sportswear	Yes	Yes		
Gucci	Designer	Yes		Yes	
Nintendo	Gaming	Yes	Yes	Yes	"Video games"
Space Jam [Toys in Happy Meals at the time]	Entertainment	Yes			
Avengers	Entertainment		Yes	Yes	
Land Rover	Automotive	Yes			
H&M	Clothing		Yes	Yes	
Dominoes	Food	Yes	Yes		
KFC	Food	Yes	Yes		
Doritos	Food		Yes	Yes	
Among Us	Gaming	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Costa	Food	Yes	Yes	Yes	
W H Smith	Retail		Yes	Yes	

Tesco	Groceries		Yes	Yes	
Primark	Clothing		Yes	Yes	
River Island	Clothing	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Chanel	Designer	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Sainsbury's	Groceries		Yes	Yes	
New Look	Clothing		Yes	Yes	
Taco Bell	Food		Yes	Yes	
Ford	Automotive			Yes	
Apple	Technology	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Kia	Automotive			Yes	
Louis Vuitton	Designer		Yes	Yes	
Oreo	Food		Yes	Yes	
J2O	Food			Yes	
Toyota	Automotive		Yes	Yes	
Lego	Toys	Yes		Yes	
Zara	Clothing		Yes	Yes	
Daz Games	YouTuber			Yes	
Morrisons	Groceries		Yes	Yes	
Claire's Accessories	Retail		Yes	Yes	
The Entertainer	Toys			Yes	
Co-Op	Groceries			Yes	
Roblox	Gaming	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Smiggle	Retail		Yes		
Galaxy	Food			Yes	
Urban Outfitters	Clothing			Yes	
Vans	Clothing			Yes	
Disney	Entertainment			Yes	
Nutella	Food			Yes	
Coca Cola	Food		Yes	Yes	
House Party	Technology			Yes	
Costco	Retail			Yes	
JD Sports	Sportswear		Yes	Yes	"A type of shop, a company and owners"
Game	Retail			Yes	
Starbucks	Food		Yes	Yes	

Star Wars	Entertainment		Yes	Yes	
Cadburys	Food			Yes	
Slazenger	Sportswear			Yes	
Premier Express	Retail			Yes	
We Chat	Social Media		Yes		
Spar	Groceries		Yes		
Facebook	Social Media	Yes	Yes		
B&M	Retail			Yes	
Currys PC World	Retail		Yes		
YouTube	Social Media	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Minecraft	Gaming	Yes	Yes	Yes	
TikTok	Social Media		Yes		
Audi	Automotive		Yes		
Samsung	Technology		Yes		
Google	Technology		Yes		
Renault	Automotive		Yes		
Victoria's Secret	Retail		Yes		
Orangina	Food		Yes		
Now TV	Entertainment		Yes		
Disney +	Entertainment		Yes		
Amazon Prime	Technology	Yes	Yes		
Fanta	Food		Yes		
Popits	Toys		Yes		
Fortnite	Gaming		Yes		
Twitter	Social Media		Yes		
Instagram	Social Media		Yes		
Whatsapp	Social Media		Yes		
Ribena	Food		Yes		
Mr Beast	YouTuber		Yes		
Grammarly	Technology		Yes		
Nandos	Food	Yes	Yes		
Netflix	Technology		Yes		
Home Bargains	Retail		Yes		
Build a Bear	Retail		Yes		

Pokemon	Toys		Yes		
Unspeakable	YouTuber		Yes		
Dunkin Donuts	Food		Yes		
BBC iPlayer	Technology		Yes		
Boots	Retail		Yes		
Let's Sushi	Food		Yes		
Pepes Pizza	Food		Yes		
RSPCA	Charity		Yes		
Pizza Express	Food		Yes		
Megan Plays	YouTuber		Yes		
Big Jill	YouTuber		Yes		
Infinite	YouTuber		Yes		
Lazer Lazer	YouTuber		Yes		
FreshyBoi	YouTuber		Yes		
Morgz	YouTuber		Yes		
Bold Martin	YouTuber		Yes		
MCCreamy	YouTuber		Yes		
MAU	YouTuber		Yes		
Ikea	Retail		Yes		
Mercedes	Automotive	Yes	Yes		
Epic Minigames	Gaming		Yes		
Burger King	Food		Yes		
McClaren	Automotive		Yes		
Destiny	YouTuber		Yes		
Pizza Hut	Food		Yes		
Maserati	Automotive		Yes		
Aunt Bessies	Food		Yes		
Millies Cookies	Food		Yes		
San Pellegrino	Food		Yes		
Hollywood	Entertainment		Yes		
Mojang	Gaming		Yes		
Laser Quest	Leisure		Yes		
Monkey Business	Leisure		Yes		
The Light Cinema	Leisure		Yes		

Vauxhall	Automotive		Yes		
Volkswagon	Automotive		Yes		
Lamborghini	Automotive		Yes		
Bugatti	Automotive		Yes		
Tesla	Automotive		Yes		
Halo	Gaming		Yes		
Our Generation	Toys			Yes	
Call of Duty	Gaming		Yes		
Havianas	Clothing		Yes		
Zizzis	Food		Yes		
Fall Guys	Entertainment		Yes		
SnapChat	Social Media		Yes		
Lakeland	Retail		Yes		
PubG	YouTuber		Yes		
Krispy Kream	Food		Yes		
Popeyes	Food		Yes		"I think a brand means a brand of a café"
Jeff Bezos	Celebrity		Yes		
Bill Gates	Celebrity		Yes		
Aldi	Groceries		Yes		"I think [a brand means] the adverts"
Hollister	Clothing				"I think a brand means a brand of handbags"
Subway	Food		Yes		
Toby Carvery	Food				
Haribo	Food				"I think a brand means a brand of sweets, Haribos"
Xbox	Gaming	Yes	Yes		
George	Clothing	Yes			
Bentley	Automotive				
Range Rover	Automotive	Yes			"A company"
Clarks	Clothing	Yes			
Chrome	Technology	Yes			
Go Henry	Finance	Yes			
Peugeot	Automotive	Yes			
Shark	Household	Yes			
Christian Dior	Designer	Yes			

Virgin	Technology	Yes			
Just Eat	Food		Yes		"I'm drawing a toy UFO, look it's a UFO docked in a park"
Yo Sushi	Food		Yes		
Meadowhall	Retail		Yes		
Baskin Robbins	Food		Yes		"I think a brand means a brand of ice cream"
Boris Johnson	Celebrity		Yes		
James Bond	Celebrity		Yes		
Grand Theft Auto	Gaming		Yes		"yeah we can't play GTA" "We're too young"
Walkers Sensations	Food			Yes	
Pringles	Food			Yes	
Android	Technology	Yes			
Hamleys	Toys		Yes		

Appendix G: Semi-Structured Interview schedule

Semi-structured Interview Questions for Participants

What sorts of things do you think are cool right now?

How important is it to be seen as cool or to fit in do you think?

What sorts of things appeal to you and your friends?

Why do you think advertisers like to reach out to children?

What do you think about young YouTubers/influencers/Creators who do toy unboxing, review videos or challenges?

Can you tell me what you like and don't like about those?

If you saw something on social media how would you know it might be trying to persuade you to buy something or spend money on something if it didn't tell you anywhere that it was an ad or sponsored? Or do you think it would be hard to tell?

Do you think it's hard to tell what is advertising and what is not when you're online (playing games, using social media, watching videos) Why or why not?

Do you think that children your age are influenced by the media? If yes, how? If no, why not?

Would you say that you are influenced in any way by your friends? Do their opinions matter to you? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

Do you ever talk yourself out of buying something? Have you ever persuaded one of your friends not to buy something, how did you do that? Why?

Appendix H: Example Interview Transcript

Interview Transcription 1 (two boys aged 10, 11 (ref: recording 13))

SS: Can you tell me about a typical day in your life, like what do you do when you get up and stuff?

IT1P1: Erm usually we just wake up and as my mum works here [at the school] i have to wake up pretty early so i have to get changed fast, and sometimes like i have a few minutes to do whatever i want

SS: And what do you do with those minutes?

IT1P1: I might play games or watch youtube

SS: Ok, watch youtube or play games, yeah, and what sort of games do you play?

IT1P1: Erm minecraft

SS: And what about you, what do you do when you wake up?

IT1P2: So on a weekday, i wake up really early, i get dressed, do my toothbrush and eat my breakfast and then go

SS: What do you have for breakfast?

IT1P2: It's kind of like, toast, cereal or crumpets like something quick and easy, then just go on the bus, the school bus, and then get to school

SS: And what do you both do when you come home from school?

IT1P1: Erm usually just play games or watch youtube because my brother's always playing fifa so i dont have anyone to play with, so i usually just play with him on the games he has on his nintendo, the one one without the detachable controllers,

SS: And your brother who plays fifa - is he older or younger than you?

IT1P1: Younger

SS: And what sort of things do you watch when you watch youtube?

IT1P1: Minecraft

SS: Is that like other people playing minecraft, like walkthroughs and things?

IT1P1: Yeah

SS: And what about you, what do you do when you get home from school?

IT1P2: Erm so when I get home i normally go sit down, watch tv, or youtube, then I go up, sometimes I'll get in my pyjamas and then I'll eat and do my work yeah and yeah that's it

SS: Ok, so we've kind of talked about playing on mine craft and things erm aside from like video games and things, what else do you think is cool or popular with kids your age at the minute?

IT1P1: Erm probably sports

SS: Sports, yeah any sports in particular?

IT1P1: Football, cricket, rugby

SS: Yeah, what do you think?

IT1P2: Erm people are usually playing fortnite or roblox

SS: Yeah, do you two play fortnite or roblox?

IT1P1: No, he does

IT1P2: Yeah I do, I play roblox, but I'm not allowed to play fortnite until I'm 12

SS: Well it is, yeah it's a 12 game isn't it?

IT1P2: Yeah

IT1P1: Yeah

SS: Do you think some of those older games are more popular than the younger-age ones?

IT1P2: Yeah

IT1P1: Yeah

SS: Why do you think that is?

IT1P1: Erm the only younger age one that I think is most popular is usually like roblox or minecraft

SS: Uh hmm

IT1P1: But the it's usually like all the older games, there's only one that's like a [age] 3 plus, but it's quite popular which is rocket league, where you play football but you're driving cars

Ok rocket league? So instead of running around kicking the ball it's the car that kicks the ball?

IT1P1: Yeah it's kind of like, you can customise your car and you get to be the car

SS: That sounds fun. And what were you going to say? Why do you think the 12 + games are getting more popular?

IT1P2: Because I think sometimes they're more addictive the kind of like, shooting, they're just a bit more fun than like building stuff or a bit more like action-y, and what I've noticed

with the younger games, like fifa, you can't play with anyone, but with the older games you can like play with your friends and like play online

IT1P1: There good for like a certain age, like 3 + but the older ones seem to be like what everyone's talking about because like more like shooting like what [IT1P2] said

SS: OK, erm do you think then that's one of the reasons that they are more popular because you can as you say play and talk with your friends and other people? Is that quite important to you?

IT1P1: Yeah because I don't really play 18s or 16s [rated games] I just play like 12s and that type of games, like Spiderman, but I like spiderman as long as [my friend] plays it (.) because I like talking to my friends but I'd probably play a bit of fifa, but it's not like I want to always play, play, play (.) it's that I want to still be a part of the group and feel like I'm not left out (.) but not, I don't want to play, spend all my time on the game

SS: When you say about, you don't want to be left out and things, how important do you think that is at your age, to kind of fit in and do things like that?

IT1P2: Probably quite important just because, when you get to an older stage of life you can still chat with them and if their like still really shy then you're holding back a bit, so it's helps to speak to other people in the world and be a bit more confident

SS: That's interesting, I'd not thought of it like that, do you think maybe if you are more of a shy child, then talking to other people online is maybe easier?

IT1P2: Yeah because you don't see them face to face

SS: OK

IT1P2: Yeah because you need them to help you and when you're older and have jobs you might need to talk to people so, like usually games when you can talk to your friends kind of improves it, it helps

SS: Yeah, and when you're playing games, so this can be any game that we've mentioned like fortnite, roblox or minecraft, whichever one you play the most, have you noticed any advertising in those games that you can think of?

IT1P1: Er yeah I think probably in games that are suited to your age

SS: Mmmmm, what do you mean by that?

IT1P1: So if it's a 12, then a 12 year old ad [advertisement] would probably come up

SS: So you see ads for other games, do you?

IT1P1: Yeah I see ads for other games when I'm playing I also just use some like health and care, like a phone app

SS: And what do you think of those ads when they pop up?

IT1P1: I think i think they're ok but sometimes, if there's ones that i really look into, i sometimes erm i sometimes remember in my head and have a look and see if i'd really like it

and then maybe watch another video to see if its actually like that or to see if i'm spending my money on a thing that i'm never going to use

SS: And what about you, have you seen anything on minecraft?

IT1P2: Erm no

SS: What about YouTube?

IT1P2: Yeah on youtube

SS: Are these ads ones that interrupt the video that you're watching, or they say skip ad something like that?

IT1P2: Yeah

SS: If you were watching something on youtube and it didn't say skip ad or advert and it didn't say sponsored anywhere and didn't take you away from the thing that you're watching, do you think that would be hard to know if it was advertising?

IT1P1: You could probably, might be able to tell but usually it says sponsored and ads

SS: If it didn't say that, would anything else give you a clue?

IT1P2: Er usually on YouTube it has like a red line (.) which shows you the duration of the video but on YouTube ads it's usually yellow so if it doesn't tell you, you could just click and see what the colour is and if it was an ad it would be yellow

SS: That's interesting, I didn't know that

IT1P2: You know when you go to fast forward or rewind on youtube, instead of that it's like yellow, you can't like interact with it because it doesn't let you skip the ad unless there's a skip ad button

SS: What about you, if you were watching something or if you're on social media, so not necessarily youtube, maybe a different app, if it didn't tell you anywhere that it was sponsored or an ad would you be able to tell if something was advertising?

IT1P1: Er, there's probably, yes and no, first you could tell what type of ad [advertisement] is it and what type of technology, or use it would be but also no because if it doesn't tell you it could always be like a blank app, like 'this is this, goodbye' and if you can't really tell what it is... I also watch other stuff I just watch sports stuff as well

SS: Is that because you like sports stuff like outside of school?

IT1P1: Yeah

SS: Ok so that's one of your interests

IT1P1: Yeah, I just like watching sports as well

SS: Do you think that children your age are influenced by the media, and by that I mean sort of tv shows, movies, games i mean everything, what do you think?

Both IT1P1 and IT1P2 together: Yeah

IT1P2: Basically like if you see an ad and it looks good, then it's usually like (.) what people would do is like get the game and play it or like if they see something on YouTube it might influence them like make them do things and stuff

SS: Yeah, what sort of things do you think it might make them do or think?

IT1P2: Like sometimes if you see something really cool then everyone's talking about it it might make you click on it and download it even if you don't like it because everyone's playing it, you might just want to not feel left out

SS: Yeah, and what do you think?

IT1P1: No, maybe gaming but no, not really

SS: Ok

IT1P1: The reason I downloaded minecraft was it looked really fun and I was watching it on YouTube so I saw it then... And then another thing I've noticed is like, luckily fortnite is free because I think they want you buy all like the skins and wraps but actually when you start looking at all of it, and buying everything, it actually makes it look like it costs zero but when you get everything it could cost 100s or 200s

SS: How do you find out about the new skins and the new things in fortnite?

IT1P1: Erm usually on adverts or YouTube

SS: Yeah?

IT1P1: Yeah

IT1P2: Yeah

SS: Does it tell you in the game anywhere, like when you're playing it?

IT1P1: Yeah it does (.) so when you arrive at it [open the game] it has like these heading things that say what's new and you should go buy it but whenever my mum or dad gets me the game currency I just spend it on like skins, it's not very wise, but stuff that I'm probably going to use to like buy more of that, in the item shop, so I just buy like things that I actually like

SS: Yeah and do you get those, I think they're called vbucks?

IT1P1: Yeah vbucks

SS: Do you get those regularly?

IT1P1: No, not very often

SS: Not very often ok. Would you like to get them more often?

IT1P1: To be honest probably not, because I know that it's not the best thing to spend your money on so when I think (.) when I watch videos I could just be getting dad's credit card and buying loads of them but I don't think it's a very sensible thing to do spending your money on game currency, it's not a very wise decision, and half the things, like my dad just says do you want vbucks, or i'll just ask politely and if he says no most of the time, my dad says do you want vbucks and I say no it's ok sometimes

IT1P2: I'm not usually allowed game currency because in the games you usually get stuff that are for free and you just get it, when your just going through the games you might unlock some things for free or you might just have them straight away when you download the game

SS: Yeah, so you play roblox don't you?

IT1P2: Yeah

SS: So have you ever had or asked for Robux?

IT1P2: Er no, I do want them because there are some things that would be really good because I have this really odd name in it but because you can't put your real name in, but if you get er the game currency in Roblox then you can change your name so it'd be cool to do that

IT1P1: I wouldn't want to put my real name on probably

SS: Why not?

IT1P1: Because you can get hacked

IT1P2: Yeah (.) Because I kind of have a rare name in a way, and there's probably not many people called my name in the world, probably only a few hundred people

SS: So it would be easy to identify you then?

IT1P2: Yeah so that's why I don't put my name on like roblox and stuff, I try and keep my name very disguised, I don't like it when people put their name on so i just put like a random name

SS: Yeah, that's sensible. Ok so we've talked about if you think you're influenced by the media, and you [IT1P2] say a little bit and you [IT1P1] say not so much, and you've kind of answered my next question, I was going to ask if you're influenced by your friends in anyway and I think you were saying you got an app because people were talking about it and stuff. Erm, can you think of, do your friends' opinions matter to you? And if so why?

IT1P2: Erm, not all the time because everyone was talking about Fortnite and stuff but I know that it's a 12+ game and it's sensible not to get and just wait until i'm older and it's going to be next year when I'm going to be 12 so it's just a little bit of time that I have to wait

SS: What about you, do you think you're influenced by your friends at all?

IT1P1: Erm yes and no, because erm when well I got fortnite from when I was playing at my cousin's house, I go to his to play and I asked my mum but my mum said no most of time,

but when, one day, she asked my auntie if it'd be suitable for me and she said yes, and it's not (.). I think where my mum will let me play every game it's (.). if it would be, like, so at the age of like, 6 or 7 I won't be playing Fortnite, it would only be if I was at a sensible age to like play the game and not like raging all the time, yeah

SS: Ok, do either of you ever talk yourself out of buying something? I think you kind of said you do a little, like if your dad offers you vbucks and you're like 'no it's fine it's not a wise thing to spend it on' but what about you, have you?

IT1P2: Erm my dad said, if I want, me and my brother could get like a PS5,

SS: Uh hmm

IT1P2: But I just said to him like for Christmas I could get it but like I said no, because we already have a PS4 so if he doesn't get it it would be like I don't really need it because I could share that, and I would get the PS4 anyway (.). I do have my own Nintendo so there's not really (.). I don't really need a new PS5

SS: Yeah, ok aside from gaming and things, is there anything else that you've maybe seen when you're out and about and you've really wanted it and you've gone no actually that's not a good idea?

IT1P1 and IT1P2 together: Yeah

SS: Can you give me an example?

IT1P1: Usually when I go to get Lego or something I usually, like when I go the Lego place now I see something that I could buy but I [only] have so much money that I don't want to like spend it so, my parents even say 'you can get this' and I'm just like 'no I don't want to get it because I want to save my money' even if they say they might give me an extra few pounds to spend and get it I still say no.

SS: What about you, what have you talked yourself out of?

IT1P2: Once on a half term holiday I went to Liverpool and we went to the outlet store (.). {speaks directly to SS} Have you ever been there?

SS: I've not been to the one in Liverpool but I've been to similar ones, like Cheshire Oaks

IT1P2: Oh yeah, I think I've been to the Cheshire Oaks one, and I went to Hamleys

SS: The toy shop?

IT1P2: Yeah, and there was this really good, there's a person in the other class called [anonymised] and he was like playing with really cool Rubik's cubes

SS: Oh yeah

IT1P2: And stuff and he kind of convinced me, because I can solve one but not, then, not when it's muddled up so I can only do the repeat one but I want to, I want one so I can solve it when it's muddled up so I went there and there was a Rubik's cube for ten pound[s] and

me and my mum convinced that 'no, what am I really going to do with it?' Get it and then probably lose it so it's not the best choice to get

SS: OK

IT1P1: I do have a Rubik's cube that I don't really use so I just leave it

SS: I think they're very tricky aren't they? [laughs]

IT1P1: Yeah I did have one but it got muddled up and I've never been able to solve it since so yeah (.) but I just thought in case it goes wrong I might not be able to do it, I'm not too good at it so there's no point

SS: You can keep it for now though and have a go in 6 months can't you?

IT1P1: Yeah

SS: Ok let me see how we're doing for time and see if i can squeeze one more question in...ok... How can you tell that something, whatever it is, is targeted at or trying to appeal to children, how do you know?

IT1P2: Er usually it has like, they try to make it like what children would do and play with and they do make it like a game that's really fun and usually like 18s [18 rated games] there are some like Call of Duty that are definitely not for children, like it looks real or like Fortnite is full of cartoons or like characters, like a banana person, it's not as realistic

SS: OK so you think that the more realistic it is, the older the age it's trying to appeal to?

IT1P2: Yeah, and also tv shows like The Mandalorian, at some point they have like star wars and lightsabers and adventures in the game

SS: In which game, in Fortnite?

IT1P2: Yeah in Fortnite

SS: Oh right ok

IT1P2: Everyone was talking about it so I know quite a bit about it, it's like really popular with everyone but I don't play it myself

SS: And what about you, what do you think? So we've talked about kind of cartoons, humour, funny characters, tie ins with movies and things... what else gives you a clue that it's aimed at children?

IT1P1: Probably, anima, anime, I mean like animation, in kids' movies but sometimes there are games that do look realistic but they're not like harmful, and they're not like (.) have loads of blood in it, like [IT1P2] was just saying in Fortnite

IT1P2: Like Fifa simulations, like VR

IT1P1: And Fortnite, like [IT1P2] was saying, it is animated, so it isn't as bad in my opinion as like the games of Call of Duty because it's set as like a kids vibe

SS: Yeah

IT1P1: But it's setting also another vibe of killing people

SS: Yeah

IT1P1: So I'm not sure, if it's like an adult game or a kids' game or in the middle

SS: It's hard isn't it?

IT1P2: But i've heard that in fortnite it's just a hologram

SS: Yeah

IT1P2: And it goes to the lobby or something, and in call of duty there's like blood and gore

IT1P1: Yeah you just DIE

IT1P2: Bodies, I think you can respawn because my dad plays it, i'm not sure if you can respawn, I've not really asked him or seen him play [it]

IT1P1: Like my dad, well if I ever wanted to play a game that's like 16 or 18 [rating] I'd always *always* have to be with my dad no matter what but I've probably only played it once but I haven't played the bad version but I've always always had to be with my dad to play it

SS: Yeah, that makes sense

IT1P2: Usually, to play an older game I'd have to be like a year younger or exactly the same age like when I can play fortnite, like in and around the middle of eleven or starting of twelve and like Call of Duty like seventeen eighteen

SS: How do you both know about Call of Duty, if you don't play it?

IT1P2: Like people say it, from someone telling me i can't remember

IT1P1: Like my dad, when it was home school, like lockdown it'd be quite boring so fun like flashy games could help and my dad saw it and started playing because he was bored in lockdown

IT1P2 to IT1P1: Do you play it?

IT1P1: No. Never.

SS: Did you just play minecraft?

IT1P2: Yeah and mario games,

SS: Yeah ok thank you so much you two that's really helpful, I really appreciate it. I'm going to stop the recording now.

Appendix I : NVivo Annotations

The screenshot displays the NVivo software interface with the 'Annotations' tab selected. The left sidebar shows the project structure, including 'Data', 'Organize', and 'Explore' sections. The main window is divided into two panes: 'Annotation' and 'File Name'. The 'Annotation' pane lists 30 text-based annotations, and the 'File Name' pane lists the corresponding files from which they were extracted.

Annotation	File Name
"sunk into your head" infers memory, recall, advertising is memorable because of its techniques	1 Creative Workshop 1 Transcription (15...
Christmas time associated with increased marketing? Increased spending and shopping	2 Creative Workshop 1 Transcription (15...
Participant demonstrating an awareness of the relationship between brands and shopping	3 Creative Workshop 1 Transcription (15...
Participant demonstrating an awareness between brands and television, perhaps an awareness of how brands are communicated?	4 Creative Workshop 1 Transcription (15...
Positive feedback from class teacher who was present throughout the workshop, participants appear to be enjoying the activity	5 Creative Workshop 1 Transcription (15...
Reference to the tie-ins with films, TV shows, popular children's characters as part of the McDonald's Happy Meal	6 Creative Workshop 1 Transcription (15...
This Group chose to create a YouTube Video about a central character of the same age as themselves. They chose Roblox - an extremely popular game with child...	7 Creative Workshop 1 Transcription (15...
Again, for clarification, the participants' explain here their chosen emphasis on exploration, gameplay newness and the social side of the game as key selling point...	8 Creative Workshop 1 Transcription (15...
Demonstrating an awareness of attracting attention (purpose of advertising) having fun, social interaction, 'trying to make other people think...' = persuasive intent	9 Creative Workshop 1 Transcription (15...
Participants appear to enjoy the session!	10 Creative Workshop 1 Transcription (15...
Fieldnotes made just after the workshop by SS:	1 Creative workshop three transcription
First mention of misperception that there is no advertising in online games. Explore this further	1 Creative workshop two transcription
Nice example of the mood in the room at the time of the workshop	2 Creative workshop two transcription
awareness that there is often a trade off between cost and convenience, multiple participants acknowledge that they could pay to remove the advertisements from...	3 Creative workshop two transcription
Interesting exchange between participants - one believes that a person (a high profile celebrity or in this case the UK Prime Minister at the time) can be a brand - L...	4 Creative workshop two transcription
Food first mention and then games - indicates that these are likely to be categories of interests to follow up on later on	5 Creative workshop two transcription
I'm wondering at this point in the analysis if it's worth amalgamating the leisure time/hobbies and interest codes as I think there is quite a bit of crossover in respon...	1 Interview eight_
Evidence of awareness of personalisation via algorithms here, participants mention cookies,	2 Interview eight_
In vivo code potentially here "easy to attract" (children as consumers)	1 Interview Five_
In vivo code "child friendly" used by participant - explore more	1 Interview four
Interesting perception that unboxing videos are aimed at a younger audience	1 Interview nine
Example of the importance of "newness"	1 Interview One
Interesting example of sophisticated decision making prior to purchase, with parent's money	2 Interview One
Interesting idea about fantasy versus reality - participant's perception that realistic gameplay is aimed at an older target audience	3 Interview One
Interesting exchange regarding if "killing people" makes Fortnite an adult game or a kid game, but again this idea that the less realistic the graphics (in this case w...	4 Interview One
Important participant feedback regarding question phrasing: Use of the phrase "fit in" could be understood as physically fit - make sure participants understand w...	1 Interview seven
There seems to be a clear link between what children think is cool and their hobbies and interests and how they choose to spend their leisure time - not exactly gro...	1 Interview ten
Like with shopping, I think it might be useful to start categorising types of YouTube videos underneath 'YouTube' rather than as separate codes (gaming, reviews, ch...	1 Interview three
"Fake reality" in vivo code - participant's own words	2 Interview three
Interesting perception from this participant here who appears to equate the promotion of this party products are "more advertising" than when a creator promote...	1 Interview twelve_
Interesting comment here about how behaviour has changed as a result of lockdown - could indicate that social interaction via online devices is more important to...	1 Interview Two_
At this point I think it might be useful to start categorising types of product (food, clothing, toys) under shopping - rather than as separate codes. Check after all in...	2 Interview Two_