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Comparing children's explicit and implicit understanding of advertising and placement on TV

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ABSTRACT

Although product placement is a frequently used promotional tool in local and international productions, particularly in combination with advertising, its study has been almost neglected in Latin America. This paper examines the explicit (verbal) and implicit (cued) understanding of advertising and placement in a sample of 9-, 12- and 15-year-old children from Chile. The results showed a more sophisticated comprehension of advertising in comparison with product placement. They also revealed that age is positively correlated with a more sophisticated understanding of both placement and advertising. Finally, significant differences were observed when comparing the use of verbal and cued methods. The results are discussed in terms of prior literature and their practical implications.

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Advertising; product placement; children; understanding

Introduction

The study of children's understanding of advertising has attracted significant attention in the literature in Europe and the USA since the 1970s, although it has barely been addressed in Latin America (Uribe and Fuentes-García 2015). These studies in developed countries have mainly focused on traditional advertising in different media such as TV, print and, recently, the Internet. These pieces of research have consistently shown that age is positively correlated with the development of two critical skills needed to cope with this technique: the ability to identify the presence of advertising (about 6 years old) and the understanding of its characteristics and purposes (about 10 years old) (Gunter, Oates, and Blades 2005; Kunkel 2001). The relevance of these findings is based on the idea that consumers' recognition of persuasive attempts leads to more sceptical attitudes toward them, reducing their potentially deceiving effect (Friestad and Wright 1994; Ham, Nelson, and Das 2015).

Despite the relevance of examining the case of advertising, it is surprising that little research has been carried on kids' understanding of other promotional actions such as placement, advergames or sponsorship. These promotional techniques make up an increasing percentage of modern communication campaigns, particularly in Latin

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America, where local brands in categories such as department stores, electronics and foods are investing heavily in them (PQ Media 2013; Salazar 2012).

There are several reasons for the growing use of these new advertising formats instead of using traditional forms of advertising to target children (and adults). Some of them are related to changes in the media consumption habits in this age group. Although media consumption has increased and TV is still the most popular media to consume audiovisual content among children, they are also increasingly using other on-demand platforms – such as the Internet – to consume the same contents (films, series, clips, videogames, etc.). Data from the UK show a moderate fall over time: those aged 4–15 dropped their daily TV consumption from 132 minutes to 118 in the 2006–2014 period (OFCOM 2015). In the case of France, audience data show no relevant changes over time in the same age group: 2.11 in 2005 versus 2.09 in the period 2005–2013 (Statista.com, 2016). Chile depicts similar trend, data (2010–2015 period) show that children's TV consumption has tended to remain steady: about 185 minutes per day in the 4–12 age group, and 170 minutes in the 13–17 group (Kantar IBOPE Media 2015). In parallel, the use of the Internet has significantly increased over time. Figures from the UK (OFCOM 2015) indicated that 9 in 10 children aged 8–15 (90%) live in a household with access to the Internet through a PC or laptop in 2007 (versus 74% in 2007). The same survey found parental estimates of children aged 8–11 being online at home for an average of 8 hours per week in 2014, compared to 7.8 hours in 2007. In the case of 12–25 kids, the increase was from 13.7 to 14.9 hours per week over the same period. In the case of Chile, available information shows that 52% of Chilean children had a PC in their home and 62% an own cell phone in 2011; in contrast, 93% of kids had a PC at home and 94% a cell phone in 2014 (Halpern Piña, and Vásquez 2014; CNTV 2014).

In addition, there are also reasons related to the characteristics of these new advertising formats that make them attractive for advertisers (even for those interested in adults audiences). On the one hand, since the commercial message is embedded in the programme content, audiences cannot escape from that marketing action (as in the case of commercial breaks). On the other hand, the integration of commercial and programme content adds an additional degree of difficulty to differentiating and understanding their commercial nature. Since placements may affect persuasion knowledge (Charry 2014, Matthes and Naderer 2016), the presence of scepticism among the young consumers is frequently lower (and also among adult people) and persuasion can operate more openly (Buijzen, Rozendaal, and Van Reijmersdal 2013; Gunter 2015; Moore and Rideout 2007).

In this context, some significant efforts have been recently made in Europe and the USA to examine these new forms of advertising. These studies have usually compared children aged about 8 and 12 (and not older children) to examine the potential evolution of their understanding of promotional tools with age, and the results have consistently shown that they have an earlier and more sophisticated understanding of traditional advertising than they do of other marketing communication tools. Moreover, it has been observed in many cases that children have difficulties detecting the presence of commercial actions or they simply do not perceive their existence (Grohs, Wagner, and Steiner 2012; Rozendaal et al. 2013, Owen et al. 2013; An, Jin, and Park 2014, Hudders, Cauberghe, and Panic 2016; van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, and Buijzen 2015).

Methodologically speaking, one of the major issues in the research on children's identification and understanding of any promotional tactics is the way in which these abilities

are measured (Owen et al. 2007). Traditionally, studies in this field have asked children for their verbal understanding of these persuasive techniques. These methods, which rely on the children's ability to express (using words) what they perceive, have been criticized due to a child's limited ability to express abstract notions. Therefore, some scholars have claimed the importance of introducing methods that fit better with children's ability to express complex ideas. In this vein, Owen et al. (2007) suggested the complementary use of visual cues because they can increase children's ability to retrieve information they have. Thus, it has been proposed that the measurement of children's understanding of promotional actions should include the use explicit (verbal) as well as implicit (non-verbal or cued) techniques (Pine and Veasey 2003).

Given that product placement is a relevant promotional tool in Latin America and no research has examined its understanding among older children, this study analyses and compares the verbal and cued understanding of advertising and placement in children and adolescents by comparatively examining their understanding of these promotional actions. Moreover, this paper spans a broader age range than traditional studies (from 8 to 15 years old) to include cued processors (aged 8–9) and early (11–12) and late (14–15) strategic processors. This expanded age range is used because prior research including 10-year-old children has failed to demonstrate a clear understanding of non-traditional forms of advertising on this age group (Owen et al. 2013). Moreover, past research has demonstrated that while older groups (14–15 years) are able to understand advertising well, but no research has been done to evaluate their understanding of non-traditional forms of advertising (Roedder 1999; Gunter, Oates, and Blades 2005).

Literature review

Children's understanding of marketing tactics

Many studies have examined children's understanding of advertising. These studies have defined two key abilities developed during childhood that allow them to deal with marketing tactics. The first refers to their ability to distinguish between advertisements and a programme's editorial content. The second, which is the focus of this study, is their ability to understand the persuasive nature of the advertising intent. These two skills are related because the comprehension of the selling intent of advertising implies that a child is previously aware of the existence of commercials as an entity different to the content of programmes (Gunter 2015; Roedder 1999).

These studies have consistently proposed that age is positively correlated with a more complex understanding of the characteristics and intention of advertising. Age has been defined as a key indicator of a child's cognitive development in which different levels in the development of this area mean a more sophisticated understanding of advertising. Many of these studies have used Piaget's general theory of cognitive development as a framework to explain the progressive comprehension of the nature of advertising, suggesting that the concrete operations stage (the second stage in this theory, between 7 and 11 years) is the critical period in which children are able to start developing a more sophisticated understanding of the motives behind advertising (Martin 1997). Other studies have employed the Roedder (1981) perspective, which is specifically dedicated to explaining a consumer's development and proposes that children evolve in terms of

processing abilities. It has been suggested that children at the limited processor stage (until age 6) only differentiate between programme and advertising, and that the subsequent stage (cued processor) is required to understand the persuasive nature of this marketing tactic. In the later phase of this stage, it is possible to detect a complex understanding of advertising and the tactics used on this promotional action (Boush, Friestad, and Wright 2015; Wright, Friestad, and Boush 2005).

The relevant point is the positive effect of age on both detecting the presence of advertising and – particularly for the objective of this study – understanding its purposes. In the latter process, children seem to start developing a progressive process of understanding the nature of the persuasive actions from about the age 8, although the evidence of the exact age in which this process actually begins is not totally conclusive, because cognitive development finally represents a process in which individual factors interact with environmental elements (Bjorklund and Causey 2017; Fisher and Silvern 1985; Mallalieu, Palan, and Laczniak 2005). For instance, Oates, Blades, and Gunter (2002) examined the responses of children aged 6–8 to television advertising in the UK. They detected that none of the 6-year olds, a quarter of the 8-year olds and only a third of the 10-year olds were able to discuss advertising in terms of persuasion. They, therefore, concluded that the purpose of advertising is not fully understood, even by many 10-year olds (Gunter, Oates, and Blades 2005). Conversely, Donohue, Henke, and Donohue (1980) suggested that children at the age of 6 (from the USA) were actually able to understand the intent of TV advertisements, and at that point in time they were able to start the process of understanding the persuasive nature of advertising. Along with the use of different methodologies, these differences may be also explained by the more frequent use of hard-sell appeals (related to the products as opposed to soft sell ones, which are more related to image) in the case of American ads, which would act as a cue to identify the aim of advertising among children (Nevett 1992; Martin 1997).

In the case of Latin America, there is no studies examining children's understanding of any marketing tactic, and the closest reference is a piece of research carried out in Spain (del Pino and Royo-Bordonada 2016). Torres and Ruiz (1998) reported a study examining children's understanding of advertising in which they interviewed a sample of 227 (42% females) Spanish kids from 8 to 14 years old. Results showed that although children at 8 were all able to differentiate between programme and advertising, they were not able to explain the source of the difference (only 15% of them provide an explanation). The 11- and 14-year-old groups massively used more complex reasons such as the argument and the format characteristics of the advertisements. In the case of kids' understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising, this study detected that only few 8-year-old children perceived the selling intent behind this tactic (18%). This percentage increased up to 32% and 73% in the 11- and 14-year-old groups, respectively. Thus, studies in the context of Latin (European) countries have tended to provide similar results as those detected in the rest of Europe in terms of a partial understanding of the advertising intention (children over 10 years old).

Children's understanding of the nature of placement

Although it is known that children tend to begin developing a sophisticated understanding of advertising characteristics around age 8 or 9, the situation is different in the case of

other forms of promotion. Nowadays, we know that in the case of the diverse forms of non-traditional promotion (product placements, sponsorships and so on) in which brands are included within the media content (such as movies, video clips or video games), children tend to have more difficulty identifying the use of a commercial technique and consequently recognizing the persuasive intention behind the brand inclusion in these formats (Owen et al. 2013). Nevertheless, there is little evidence in terms of what age they actually begin to develop the skills needed to comprehend other marketing techniques that are embedded in nature.

Product placement in movies and TV programmes is a clear example of the use of these subtly persuasive embedded techniques that consist of including brand identifiers in entertainment media programming (Karrh 1998; McCarty 2004). Because the message is embedded, any person may have a more difficult time processing the product placements than they do in traditional advertising because they may not recognize the function of the brand message, which in turn limits the activation of consumer scepticism. This situation is more complex in the case of children, because of their partial understanding of the nature of advertising (Friestad and Wright 1994; Obermiller, Spangenberg, and MacLachlan 2005; Lee and Faber 2007). In the case of product placement, attention is focused on programme content, which increases involvement and decreases scrutiny of the commercial message (Grohs, Wagner, and Steiner 2012). In this context, it is possible to assert that it is more difficult to differentiate, understand and respond to non-traditional advertising techniques due to their embedded nature, particularly in the case of children (Owen et al. 2013).

Not many studies have examined the way children understand these non-traditional persuasion techniques. One of the first papers in this line of research was conducted in the USA by Mallalieu, Palan, and Laczniak (2005). They qualitatively examined the way children understood advertising and included a question about sponsorship in kids aged 5–7 and 11–12 years, verbally interviewing them in small groups. These researchers detected that the younger group had more difficulty identifying the source and purpose of sponsorship than advertisements. Grohs, Wagner, and Steiner (2012) also examined the specific understanding of sponsorship in a sample of Austrian children. Along with the analysis of the factors that influenced children aged 6–12 to correctly identify an advertisement, the study also aimed to address the children's ability to understand the technique. The team's methodology used a cued measure that incorporated two statements for the children to evaluate as true, false or do not know: (1) companies show their logos to make people purchase their products, and (2) companies pay to show their logos in a place. The results showed that age was a critical variable for explaining understanding. None of the 6-year olds could correctly identify the purpose of this marketing tactic. At the age of 9, the figure rose to 23%, at 10, it was 71%, and at 12, 92% of kids showed good comprehension of the nature of sponsorship as advertising tactic.

Studies have also evaluated the case of advergames as another form of presenting embedded commercial messages. In this line of research, An and Stern (2011) examined the effect on children of the information that the advergame that they are playing contained commercial content. These scholars detected that those who played the advergame with the information did not show better cognitive understanding about the selling intent of the advergame than those without the ad break (see also An, Jin, and Park 2014; Mallinckrodt and Mizerski 2007).

Owen et al. (2013) presented the only study that has evaluated the understanding of placement (along with other tactics) and compared it with advertising. They analysed a sample of 134 children from the UK in the second grade (about 7 years old) and fifth grade (about 10 years old). The methodology used began with an open-ended question, which was subsequently coded. In the case of placement, it was 'why do you think there are brand names in films, like Dr. Pepper in Spiderman' and used similar questions for the rest of tactics, for instance, sponsorship. Then they randomly presented the children with cartoons showing eight different explanations for the use of the tactics, and children were asked to select the first and the second most important reasons (cartoons represented different levels of understanding of the marketing techniques). The results showed, first, that they had a significantly more sophisticated understanding of advertising than they did of the other more embedded promotional techniques. Second, that age was positively correlated to an increasing comprehension of all forms of advertising. Third, they detected that among the non-traditional advertising tactics, brand placements (in games and especially in movies) were particularly difficult for children to understand because the entertaining context did not allow them to use all of the available cognitive resources to process these techniques.

The methodological controversy of the studies in this field

When attempting to understand the persuasive nature of advertising and other similar commercial tactics, it is important to note that the vast majority of the research has suggested that explicit understanding (or verbal explanation) of advertising is not very complex during childhood. It has, therefore, been proposed that the main source of differences in the studies appears to be in the methodology used, which can be divided into verbal (explicit) and non-verbal (implicit). Verbal methods directly (explicitly) ask children about the differences between advertisements and programmes or about the persuasive intention of the advertisers. Non-verbal methods seek to evaluate children's understanding in terms of cues that allow researchers to infer the existence of such understanding (Gunter 2015, Pine and Vasey 2003).

The vast majority of research in this field – using qualitative or quantitative approaches – has relied on verbal methods to examine children's comprehension of advertising (Martin 1997). A clear example of these studies is reported by Oates et al. (2003) that developed a set of focus groups in which they openly asked to children from 6 to 10 years old about what are advertisements for? Do we need advertisements? If there were no advertisements what would happen? After coding and analysing their responses they detected that children were gaining a more sophisticated (explicit) understanding of advertising when older.

Although these studies using verbal methods have been useful in terms of using the same way of measure the understanding of advertising across different ages, several authors have criticized the only use of these techniques (Macklin 1987; Moses and Baldwin 2005). In the case of children advertising research, the argument is that children generally lack the vocabulary and verbal skills needed to express abstract notions such as the persuasive nature of commercial messages. In other words, it has been repeatedly mentioned that many verbal response tasks (such as those related to express the comprehension of the complex nature of advertising) are age-inappropriate (Donohue, Henke, and Donohue 1980;

Wright, Friestad, and Boush 2005). For that reason, the solely use of these measures omit the fact that children constitute a specific population in mental development, for which it could be imprecise to rely only on methodologies applicable for older children or adults (Owen et al. 2007; Moore and Lutz 2000).

Moreover, recent advances – particularly related to neuroscience – have provided new evidence questioning the excessive reliance on verbal measures in the study of marketing communications, even among adult audiences. The main criticism is that self-reported measures may not tap into the real answers because the vast majority of human thinking and emotionality is not properly conscious. Consequently, people are not able to clearly identify their mental process, even though individuals believe that they are aware of them. In this sense, the use of verbal measures may lead to biased conclusions, which is more dramatical in the case of children because of their limited verbal abilities (Kennedy and Northover 2016; Berger et al. 2016; Johansson et al. 2006; Nisbett and Wilson 1977, Puccinelli et al. 2001).

Thus, it has been asserted that children's cognitive abilities coupled with the difficulty of gaining access to their implicit knowledge through verbal expression would demand the use of other data collection tools (Ezan, Gollety, and Hémar-Nicolas 2015; Pine and Veasy 2003; Donohue, Henke, and Donohue 1980; Owen et al. 2007). It is based on the assumption that children may have beliefs at the high level of abstraction, which are not possible to verbally express outside the context of natural television viewing (Wright, Friestad, and Boush 2005). In practice, researchers have, therefore, proposed the complementary use of non-verbal methods to provide a more valid measurement that is better suited to the cognitive status of children, most commonly through the use of pictures (Macklin 1987; Pine and Veasey 2003; Owen at al. 2007). Children are shown different pictures that represent the intention of the advertising and asked to verbally identify the goal of advertising as a means of providing a uniform interpretation of the picture's meaning (Owen et al. 2007; Pine and Veasey 2003).

In this line, Owen and colleagues (2007) conducted a study that examined the understanding of traditional advertising in 136 children aged 7 and 10 years old from the UK. They used both verbal and non-verbal techniques, which allowed them to compare the level of comprehension using these different techniques. The results showed that the use of visual stimuli demonstrated a more sophisticated understanding of the purpose of commercial messages in both age groups. In fact, they detected that the children seemed to have an implicit (cued) understanding of advertising at 7-year olds – 60% of them identified selling as the purpose of ads using pictures rather than just 19% when using traditional verbal methods. In the 10-year-old group, 83% showed a sophisticated understanding of selling intent under the cued condition, while just 67% did when unprompted. They, therefore, concluded that not all of the children were able to return a verbal response that allowed the researchers to infer that they understood the persuasive nature of advertising.

Therefore, and based on the prior literature, a set of three main hypotheses are posited for this study:

H1: *Children have a more sophisticated understanding of advertising than of product placement.*

H2: *Older children have a better comprehension of advertising and placement than younger children do.*

H3: *Measures using pictorial-cued methods reveal an earlier understanding of promotional techniques than verbal methods do.*

Method

In this study, we individually interviewed 138 children (43% girls), divided into three age groups: 8–9 ($N = 46$), 11–12 ($N = 46$), and 14–15 ($N = 46$) years old. Since prior research conducted with young children has demonstrated a poor understanding of placement, this paper incorporated older groups in order to determine the possible increase in the comprehension of placements at older ages. All of the children attend schools with children from mainly lower–middle class families (fourth and fifth socioeconomic decile[1]).

The study was conducted in four schools belonging to a major Chilean educational foundation. Informed consents were obtained in the mid-year parent–teacher meeting, during which they were told about the research and the methods employed in this study. A group of children was randomly selected from among the students who had authorization to participate and individually interviewed by a team of 14 trained researchers, all of whom were postgraduate students from a large business school.

Following the procedures defined by Owen et al. (2007, 2013), the children were first asked an open-ended question about the reason for the advertising (or placement) and then presented a randomly ordered set of cards with pictorial cues about the reasons behind that promotional technique. In order to avoid an order bias, 50% of the sample was first asked about advertising and the other 50% of the sample about product placement. To verify that the children recognized the product placement technique, each was shown a brief clip (on an electronic tablet) of scenes from the films Superman, Transformer and Richie Rich and then asked to mention the most important reason for the promotional action (verbal measure) and then the cued measure (cards). The inclusion of these scenes was based on a pretest with 20 children between 9 and 15 years old, in which several placements were showed to them. These three were the most noticeable (prominent) examples of that marketing technique and, consequently, they were considered as good examples of placements. Each individual interview lasted approximately 5–7 minutes, and at the end, each child received a healthy snack (juice and two cereal bars) in appreciation for his or her participation.

Cued measures were used from the Owen et al. study (2013). Seven levels of understanding (plus a level 'zero' describing 'no understanding') were defined for both placement and advertising (see Figure 1). These cards were produced by a professional designer and reproduced as plastic cards in high-definition colour to generate a more professional stimulus. To ensure their validity for use in Chile, a group of 13 marketing and/or psychology experts classified the responses in terms of degree of sophistication. The experts observed an appropriate fit (chi square) for both advertising ($X^2(\text{df} = 6, n = 13) = 44.386, p < 0.001$) and placement cards ($X^2(\text{df} = 6, n = 13) = 98.911, p < 0.001$). In the case of the open-ended questions, the transcriptions of the answers were coded by a group of five research assistants (previously trained), who coded all the responses in terms of the level of understanding of these promotional actions using the classification proposed by Owen et al. (2013), which is basically the same as the one used in the cued responses (see Table 1). In this process, there was an intercoder reliability of 0.73 using Scott's Pi formula (Riffe et al. 2014). Thus a 0–7 scale was also used to classify the open-ended responses of

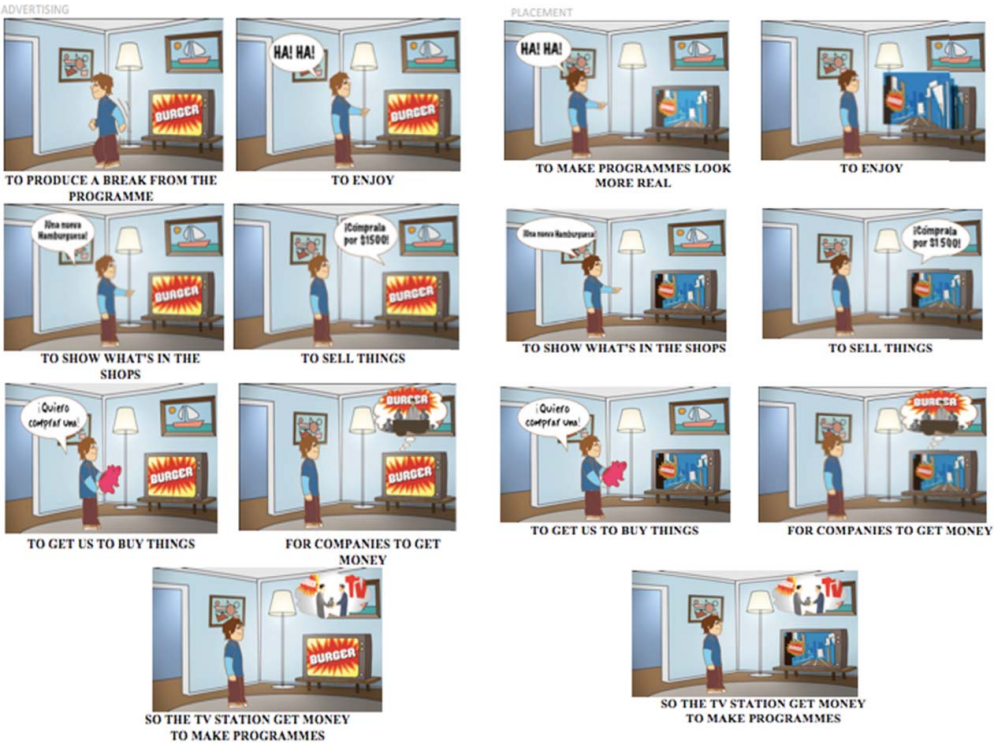

Figure 1. Cards used in this study.

the children and compared with those obtained in the cued responses. In both scales, and in general terms, the level 0 meant no understanding; an average under 3 represented a limited level of understanding of the advertising or placement; an average over 3 and under 4 denoted an informational level of understanding of the promotional technique; and an average over 4 meant a persuasive understanding of the promotional technique (Owen et al. 2013).

Based on all of these considerations and to evaluate the hypotheses, this study conducted a 2 (type of promotional action) × 2 (type of measure) × 3 (age groups) ANOVA to determine the significant effect of the examined variables over the dependent variable: level of understanding of the promotional action.

Table 1. Codes used to classify open responses (Owen et al. 2013).

Level of understanding		Advertising	Placement
No understanding	0	Don't know/ to watch them	Don't know/ to watch them
Limited	1	To produce a break from the program	To make programmes look more real
Understanding	2	To enjoy	To enjoy
Informational Understanding	3	To show what's in the shops	To show what's in the shops
Persuasive understanding	4	To sell things	To sell things
	5	To get us to buy things	To get us to buy things
	6	For companies to make money	For companies to make money
	7	So the TV stations get money to make programs	So the TV stations get money to make programs

Results

Comparison of the understanding of advertising and product placement

This study's first hypothesis proposed that children had a more sophisticated understanding of advertising than of product placement. Using understanding as a dependent variable, the three-way ANOVA test (using age, type of measure and promotional tool as predictors) showed a main effect for all three variables, but not for the interactions among them (see the following point in the results).

In the case of the variable promotional tool (advertising versus placement), significant differences were detected ($F(1, 138) = 123.023$, $p < 0.001$), in which the total level of comprehension of traditional advertising was better than the understanding of placement (see Table 2). In the case of advertising, the sample's average (using both methods of measure) was 4.71, which shows a general panorama of an appropriate comprehension of the persuasive nature of this tactic. For placement, on the other hand, the mean was 3.42, which demonstrated a less sophisticated comprehension of the promotional tool (informational understanding).

The situation was the same in the subsample of 9-year olds ($F(1, 46) = 13.179$, $p < 0.001$), 12-year olds ($F(1, 46) = 10.528$, $p < 0.001$) and 15-year olds ($F(1, 46) = 20.278$, $p < 0.001$). That is to say, the situation was the same difference across the three age groups and both measures (verbal and cued). As it is shown in Table 2, kids depicted always a better understanding of advertising (in terms of its persuasive nature) that product placement (in which an informational level of understanding of this marketing tactic was detected).

Moreover, a more sophisticated understanding of advertising than placement was also detected using either a verbal ($F(1, 46) = 29.003$, $p < 0.001$) or cued ($F(1, 46) = 17.132$, $p < 0.001$) measure (see Table 2). In both cases, the understanding of the objective of advertising was as a persuasive tactic, and in the case of placement just as an informational tactic. Altogether, these results enable the corroboration of the study's first hypothesis on the significant differences in the level of understanding of advertising and placement in general, across the three age groups and using any of the two methods of measure.

Understanding of advertising and placement at different ages

This study's second hypothesis posited that older children would have a better comprehension of advertising and placement than younger children. As mentioned above, ANOVA test showed the existence of a main effect for the variable age ($F(2, 138) = 37.999$,

Table 2. The understanding of advertising and placement across the different age groups (means in a 1-to-7 scale).

	Explicit		Implicit		Total	Total	Total	Total	
Age	Ads	Place	Ads	Place	Explicit	Implicit	Ads	Place	Total
15	4.74	3.63	5.67	4.22	4.21	4.95	5.21	3.94	4.56
12	4.31	3.29	4.98	3.60	3.78	4.29	4.65	3.38	4.02
9	3.75	2,48	4.58	3.43	3.12	4,01	4.13	3.01	3.68
Total	4.27	3.14	5.04	3.83	3.68	4.45	4.71	3.42	

$p < 0.001$), in which older children depicted a more sophisticated understanding of the promotional tools (see Table 2). The polynomial contrast included in the ANOVA test verified the presence of a significant linear trend ($p < 0.001$), which suggests that children's explicit understanding of promotional tools increases with age and that it would continue to improve beyond the age of 12.

In the particular case of advertising, the comparison of means at different ages shows significant differences ($F(2, 138) = 5.806$, $p < 0.001$). A specific analysis comparing particular age groups showed significant differences between the 9- and 12-year olds ($F(1, 92) = 3.189$, $p < 0.005$). In this case, it was possible to detect the establishment of the first level of persuasive advertising ('to sell things'). The contrast between 12- and 15-year olds also showed a significant increase ($F(1, 92) = 3.084$, $p < 0.005$), but in this case it reached an average of more than 5 ('to get us to buy things'), which reflects an even more sophisticated understanding of the persuasive role of advertising (see Table 2). In other words, and as predicted by prior literature, the understanding of advertising continued after the age of 12 and depicts a more complex comprehension of its persuasive character.

In the case of placement, there were also significant variations among the different age groups examined in this study ($F(2, 138) = 7.094$, $p < 0.001$), except in the case of the 9- and 12-year olds, which showed no difference and their level of understanding remained closer to the level of informational understanding. The comparison of the 12- and 15-year-old groups, however, detected significant differences ($F(2, 138) = 3.125$, $p < 0.01$), in which the level of understanding was very close to an understanding of the persuasive nature of this promotional tool. This finding is showing a later development of the changes in the understanding of the nature of placement (in comparison with advertising), because significant differences are detected only in the older groups, and only at 15 kids are in average close to understand its persuasive nature.

Thus, in general, these results corroborate the second hypothesis of this study that proposed that older children would have a better comprehension of advertising and placement than younger children. Moreover, they suggest that an improving in the understanding of the nature of product placement is developed later than the comprehension of the character of advertising.

Comparison between open-ended and cued measures

This article's third hypothesis posited that cued methods would allow researchers to observe a more sophisticated understanding of both advertising and product placement than the traditional verbal methods.

As mentioned, there was a main effect for the variable type of measure ($F(1, 138) = 58.269$, $p < 0.001$), in which cued evaluation performed better than explicit techniques (Table 2). In the case of advertising, there were significant differences detected in both measures ($F(1, 138) = 8.354$, $p < 0.001$), with implicit measures showing a more sophisticated understanding of this promotional tool. In fact, the overall average of the sample for the verbal measure of advertising was 4.27, which represents the first level of persuasive understanding ('to sell things'). In the cued measure, the average was 5.04, which represents a more complex comprehension of the persuasive intention of advertising ('to get us to buy things') (Owen et al. 2013). A similar difference was detected at the different age groups. For example, at age 9, the verbal method depicted an informational

understanding of advertising (3.75, close to persuasive), but the average of the implicit measure at the same age showed a clear presence of persuasive understanding (4.58). At 15, the explicit measure depicted a figure approaching the second level of the persuasive understanding, but the average of the cued measure was the definitive presence of this level.

A similar situation was observed in the case of product placement, in which cued measures depicted a better overall understanding of this marketing tactic than verbal questions ($F(2, 138) = 58.269$, $p < 0.001$). The average of the explicit measure (3.14) shows a clear presence of informational understanding of placement, but the implicit measure depicted an average close to a more persuasive comprehension of this promotional tool (3.83). This difference is particularly clear in the case of the 15-year-old group in which the implicit measure denotes a persuasive level of understanding of placement (4.22). It is important to note that these differences between explicit and cued measures were detected in all age groups with the exception of the comparison between the 9- and 12-year olds in the case of placement.

Therefore, the examination of the results using cued and verbal methods corroborates the third hypothesis of this study in terms of the differences between the results obtained from these measures. These divergences were in terms of the level of understanding depicted by children (lower in the case of verbal methods) but in terms neither of the existence of a better understanding of advertising (than placement) nor that age tends to increase the level of comprehension of these marketing tactics.

Conclusions

This study evaluated the understanding of advertising and placement among children and adolescents from Chile using a sample of 9-, 12- and 15-year-old children. It used both explicit and cued methods to evaluate their comprehension of these promotional tools. The results show the different levels of understanding of advertising and placement: a more sophisticated comprehension of advertising is detected in comparison with product placement. The significance of this difference is that it represents a qualitative divergence between the two promotional tools. For example, using explicit measures, the average level of comprehension of advertising in this sample represented a persuasive understanding, while the level of comprehension of placement revealed a limited (informational) understanding of it. This finding provides additional support to the prior results from Owen et al. (2013), who reported that children have significant problems processing embedded forms of promotion. This situation makes product placement problematic because the child's attention is focused on the entertaining content rather than on the commercial messages, leaving few resources to comprehend the persuasive nature of the product placement (Boush, Friestad, and Wright 2015). In addition, it may be suggested that advertising provides more cues that allow kids to perceive that they are in front of a promotional action (compared with placement). This is in the same line that hard-selling appeals may provide more cues than soft-selling ones (Henke 1999; Nevett 1992), which could help children better awareness of the symbolic nature of advertising (Robertson and Rossiter 1974).

This study also examined the role of age and included older age groups, which had not been incorporated in prior research on non-traditional advertising tactics. The findings show that age was positively correlated with a more sophisticated understanding of both

placement and advertising between the ages of 9, 12 and 15. The difference is related to the previous point made in this section. In the case of advertising, comprehension quality increases from a basic persuasive comprehension to a more complex understanding of the persuasive nature of this communication action. In the case of placement, the change over time occurs in terms of a shift from an informational understanding to a basic persuasive comprehension. That is to say, in both cases, there is a relevant evolution across the different ages, but from different starting points. This corroborates prior research on both advertising and placement that has reported the key role of age as a predictor of a more sophisticated understanding of promotional tools among children and adolescents (Gunter, Oates, and Blades 2005; Grohs, Wagner, and Steiner 2012; Owen et al. 2013).

Furthermore, this study detected an interesting situation in the role of age (in the joint analysis of cued and verbal techniques). In the particular case of placement, there was no difference in the comprehension between the 9- and 12-year-old groups (as was observed in the understanding of advertising). In the case of advertising, this may show that between these age groups, there is a critical age in the comprehension of this tactic, as previous studies in the UK have shown (Gunter 2015). In the case of placement, this is a new finding that demonstrates that the evolution of the comprehension of placement seems to be later than the understanding of advertising. Moreover, this finding suggests that in the examination of the non-traditional advertising, it is recommendable to include an even broader age range in order to detect differences over time among children and the potential understanding of the commercial intention of this tactic.

Additionally, this study compared the use of explicit and cued methods to evaluate the understanding of promotional tools and complex ideas in general. Using the two methods complementarily enables a better overall perspective on the process (Pine and Veasey 2003). One interesting finding is that the difference between the cued and explicit measures did not decrease as the children matured, but rather remained similar in terms of average differences. A potential explanation is that even when both methods attempt to evaluate the same degree of understanding, the capacity of implicit knowledge to capture intuitive ideas continues to produce differences between the methods (Berry and Dienes 1993). In addition, results show that in the particular case of the cued evaluation of placement, there was an understanding of the commercial intention between the 12- and 15-year-old groups. This would mean that before the age of 15, there is a significant change in the implicit (tacit) understanding of the commercial nature placement, which may not be transformed into explicit understanding of it (Berry and Dienes 1993). Nevertheless, it may be considered as an antecedent to produce transference of this knowledge – from implicit to explicit – (Berry, and Broadbent 1988) since that age, which is relevant information for future media literacy programmes (Burn and Durran 2007).

These results generally corroborate an idea that has been increasingly put forth in recent research in the field of non-traditional advertising that stresses the importance of not assuming that the process of understanding advertising is necessarily transferable to other promotional actions, particularly to those with embedded messages (Nairn and Fine 2008; Owen et al. 2013). Arguments have been made that advertising to children is essentially fair because they have the critical skills to process these messages from the time they are 7 or 8 years old. This assumption is not applicable to the case of placement; however, because of the inherent difficulties young children tend to have even recognizing the presence of a commercial message and therein making the practice rather deceptive

in nature (Boush, Friestad, and Wright 2015). In this sense, the debate over the regulation of product placement merits further discussion.

In this vein, the traditional regulation of advertising (and also media literacy programmes) based on the idea that children are able to differentiate advertising from programme content and understand its persuasive nature is not necessarily applicable to embedded advertising. If the process of understanding product placement is not the same as traditional advertising, a logical conclusion is that new regulations and self-regulation that recognize the different nature of embedded forms of promotional actions are needed. This difference seems obvious but no less important; the integration of commercial and entertaining content makes children focus on the content instead of the promotion, limiting their defences and making the message deceptive (Campbell 2006). Therefore, further research is needed to determine whether the understanding of placement follows similar patterns as those described in this study across the different socioeconomic levels and other countries in this region (van Reijmersdal 2015).

Note

1. Official information of the school report (SIP, 2013).

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