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The Necessity of Digital Advertising Literacy for Turkey in the 21st Century

21. Yüzyılda Dijital Reklam Okuryazarlığının Türkiye İçin Önemi

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Abstract

The 21st century witnesses that people live in a world intertwined with various kinds of advertising, which utilize any possible channel to reach its audience to persuade them to think, behave and live in the desired way, and that the advertising industry progresses further each passing day with the help of opportunities provided by digital technologies. Therefore, it is vital for the people in this century to avoid falling behind this progress and develop the necessary skills to defend and empower themselves against any persuasive messages embedded explicitly or implicitly in digital advertisements. When Turkey is considered, it is seen that the rates of digital ad investments and spending have shown a considerable increase lately, resulting in a possible increase in the probability of people encountering numerous and different types of digital advertising during their time spent online, which has also increased dramatically in recent years. From this point of view, drawing from some preliminary research, this paper attempts to discuss the necessity of digital advertising literacy in the context of Turkey.

Keywords: Advertising, Digital Advertising, Advertising Literacy, Turkey, Review.

Öz

21. yüzyıl, hedef kitlesini istenilen yönde düşünme, davranma ve yaşama konusunda ikna etmek amacıyla onlara ulaşmak için mümkün olabilecek her kanalı kullanan çeşitli reklam türleri ile sarmalanmış bir dünyada insanların yaşamlarını sürdürdüğüne ve reklam endüstrisinin dijital teknolojilerin sağladığı olanakların yardımı ile birlikte her geçen gün ilerleme kaydettiğine tanıklık etmektedir. Bu sebeple, bu yüzyılda insanların bu ilerlemenin gerisinde kalmaktan kaçınmaları ve dijital reklamlara açık veya gizil biçimde yerleştirilmiş olan herhangi bir ikna edici mesaj karşısında kendilerini savunmak ve güçlendirmek için gerekli becerileri kazanmaları önem arz etmektedir. Türkiye açısından duruma bakıldığında, dijital

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reklam yatırımı ve harcamaları oranının son zamanlarda önemli düzeyde artış sergilediği görülmektedir ve dijital ortamlarda daha fazla zaman geçirmeye başlayan insanların da bu durumdan ötürü dijital reklamın sayısız ve farklı türleri ile karşılaşma olasılığının artması söz konusu olabilmektedir. Bu bakış açısından hareketle, değerlendirme türündeki bu çalışma konuya ilişkin öncül araştırmaların bulguları ışığında dijital reklam okuryazarlığının önemini Türkiye bağlamında tartışmayı amaç edinmektedir.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Reklamcılık, Dijital Reklamcılık, Reklam Okuryazarlığı, Türkiye, Değerlendirme.

Introduction

As social beings, people benefit from communicational activities for purposes like expressing opinions, feelings, and desires, and persuasion. Similarly, brands utilize them to have the power to shape and persuade the society to do what they demand. Wright, Friestad and Boush (2005) state that advertising as brands' substantial tool for persuasive communication intends to advertently deceive individuals at any age, and that it can misguide people through its communication strategies even when it has no intent of advertent inducement. In addition, the fact that there is a blurring line between advertising and other digital content (Owen, Lewis, Auty, & Buijzen, 2013; Rozendaal, Buijzen, & Valkenburg, 2010; Taylor, 2009; Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012; Verhellen, Oates, de Pelsmacker, & Dens, 2014), that people have less experience of digital advertising than conventional advertising (Cornish, 2014; Hudders, Cauberghe & Panic, 2016), and it does not indicate that the media content is advertising, just like the clutters in conventional media, can terminate the functioning of various mechanisms, which hamper the persuasion levels of people exposed to digital advertising. Thus, it is asserted that every individual, be a child or adult, should reach to a high level of capability to comprehend how, why and when advertising deceives and/or misleads, and how to react against it (Cornish, 2014).

The digital advertising literacy skills necessary for the re-activation of the mechanisms prompting people to awaken against the persuasive messages are sub-skills of media literacy (Çelik, 2016; Hwang, Yum & Jeong, 2018; Macdonald & Uncles, 2007), which evokes critical thinking by steering consumers toward cognizance of the real intent behind digital media contents, and reduces their persuasive impact (Kelly-Holmes, 2016; Rozendaal, Opree & Buijzen, 2016; Yates, 2001). The acquisition of the literacy skills regarding digital advertising, which tries to lure consumers by obscuring the persuasive intent to make purchases in every corner of digital platforms and serving the interests of all actors in the advertising ecosystem with only one click, as Yates (2001) asserts, can influence other decisions people make throughout their lifetime. At this point, it must be noted here that advertising sells not only products or services, but also lifestyles, identities, and ideologies re-produced by advertising messages to satisfy consumers' needs which they dream of (Nas, 2013; 2015a; 2015b; 2016; 2018), which may indirectly lead to the consumption of what is promoted.

The critical evaluation of all messages in digital media, particularly advertising messages (An, Jin & Park, 2014; Rozendaal, Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2011; Verhellen, Oates, de Pelsmacker & Dens, 2014) is one of the paramount signs indicating that the individual is literate in the digital world. In this regard, the critical attitude toward digital advertising messages by asking questions like "Why do I see this content?", "What does it want me to do?", "What is the real intent of the sender?" can

affect the feelings, decisions and behaviours after exposure, and support consumers to consciously maintain their lives by terminating the "consumer impotence" against advertising. For instance, it is contemplated that advergames, originating from the idea of using games – an entertaining platform – for advertising purposes, have the potential to create desired opinions and feelings about brands (Hudders, Cauberghe & Panic, 2016) in the minds and hearts of the consumers who are mostly unable to realize the game's *raison d'être* because of the interactive and entertaining nature of advergames (Panic, Cauberghe & de Pelsmacker, 2013; Taşkaya & Aydoğan, 2019). Besides, advergames can becloud the persuasive intent of advertising (van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal & Buijzen, 2011), and, as Taylor (2009) claims, can lure the consumers into purchase.

In order to cope with the tactics of advertisers aiming to guide in line with their own interests the basic need of people to consume for their survival, digital advertising literacy skills, as Spielvogel and Terlutter (2011) asserts, are one of the skill sets required for being a responsible consumer from birth to death. In this sense, advertising literacy providing the digital society members with the ability to recognize, comprehend, analyze and distinguish advertising from other media contents in regards to its selling and persuasive intent, its source and target audience (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2005; De Pauw, De Wolf, Hudders & Cauberghe, 2018; Macdonald & Uncles, 2007; Nelson, 2016; Owen, Lewis, Auty & Buijzen, 2013; Rozendaal, Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2011; Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012; Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2005; Wei, Fischer & Main, 2008), ultimately endues the consumers with the power to protect themselves from and to be critical of digital advertising (An, Jin & Park, 2014; Çelik, 2016; Hudders et al., 2017; Hwang, Yum & Jeong, 2018; Livingstone & Helsper, 2006). In another words, advertising literacy defined by Malmelin (2010) as "the ability to recognize, evaluate and understand advertisements and other commercial messages" (p. 130), shapes the opinions of consumers regarding the desires, strategies and tactics of advertisers, and coping strategies (De Pauw, De Wolf, Hudders & Cauberghe, 2018; Nelson, 2016; Panic, Cauberghe & de Pelsmacker, 2013; Rozendaal, Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2009; Rozendaal, Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2011; Verhellen, Oates, de Pelsmacker & Dens, 2014). To conclude, for being digital advertising literate, people should go beyond recognizing digital advertising, and know how to cope with and react to it. The digital advertising literacy skills empowering people to maintain their lives as active consumers (Del Mar Pàmies, Ryan & Valverde, 2016) since the beginning of their existence in the wombs of their mothers (Ponelienė, 2012) enable them resist and oppose against its persuasiveness (Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012). Thus, it is necessary to launch initiatives for all citizens to develop these skills.

The current state of Turkey in terms of digital advertising literacy

Turkey is a country with a population of 83 million as of (2020), most of whom use Internet for 7 hours 29 minutes on a daily average mostly for watching videos (93%), and use social media (We Are Social and Hootsuite, 2020a). Because of its considerable population of Internet and social media users (IAB Turkey, 2019a), advertisers canalize their advertising plans into digital media, and according to Reklamcılar Derneği (Turkish Association of Advertising Agencies) (2020), this has made Turkey the 35th biggest market in terms of the size of media investments directed to the digital media platforms, and the 5th country showing the highest growth in digital advertising investments

with a percentage of 19,1% (IAB Turkey, 2019b). The statistical data indicate that digital is a fast-growing platform with the largest share in advertising investments (IAB Turkey, 2019a; Statista, 2020), and that digital media users in Turkey need to be aware of and react against the potential disadvantages of digital advertising by attaining digital advertising literacy skills. Notably, the data of Digital 2020 survey seem pleasant, since it points out that more than half of the population in Turkey expressed concerns about the reality of the digital contents and about how companies use their personal data, used some sort of adblocking tools, and deleted cookies from web browsers (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020a), and 60 percent of its population expressed concerns about the abuse of personal Internet data. However, in fact, Turkey ranks under the world average of most concerned countries (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020b). Therefore, thisentails that people in Turkey need to develop all skills of digital advertising literacy to cope with and act against digital advertising, since digital advertising literacy goes beyond only concerning, cookie-deleting, and adblocking in the 21st century, when we see overt and/or covert advertising everywhere.

Before starting the initiatives for citizens to develop advertising literacy skills, it is substantial to illustrate the current state through comprehensive research, which is limited in Turkey. Among these, Erdem (2014) conducted research with elementary school children, in which she found out that children failed to identify digital advertising types as advertising, and showed no advertising suspicion. Similarly, Ardıç Çobaner and Öğüt (2017) revealed that although two-to-six years old children could recognize brands in food ads, they had difficulty in understanding the commercial nature of covert ads like advergames, and beared positive emotions, resulting in the favorible consumption of the promoted brand. In a similar vein, Samav (2019) attempted to discover parents' attitudes and concerns about food commercials, and ascertained that parents considered that ads negatively affected their children's dietary patterns, and were concerned about the free promotional products, but not the prevalence of unhealthy food commercials on TV. These studies show that children and parents mostly lack the knowledge and disliking of and skepticism toward advertising.

Regarding the advertising literacy levels of people older than children, there are two research in the related Turkish literature. In their study with university students, Taşkaya and Aydoğan (2019) revealed that the participants could not comprehend the persuasive mechanism of advergames, and those who were enrolled in media literacy course did not differ from others in terms of their advertising literacy levels, showing that media literacy course lacked the activisation of critical thinking about advertising. Çalışkan and Baytimur (2019) introduced a similar finding, which underlined that university students enrolled in advertising courses performed better than others at understanding the commercial nature of advertising. These two findings stress the importance of the adaptation of the media literacy course to the requirements of the digital age, including advertising literacy skills.

Another study by Kömür (2019) unveiled that those seniors performed worse than young and middle age consumers, and children performed better than middle age consumers in terms of advertising literacy performance and negative attitudes toward advertising, which signals that it is urgent for older people to develop advertising literacy skills.

Conclusion

Drawing from the results of previous research in Turkey, this paper argues that digital advertising literacy training programs for all citizens at any age should be initiated, and awareness-raising campaigns should be launched in Turkey, where digital advertising surrounds people at an increasing pace, as data show. It is also noteworthy to call for conducting more qualitative and quantitative research to determine the level of digital advertising literacy of people in Turkey.

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