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# Online advertising: examining the content and messages within websites targeted at children

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# Online advertising: examining the content and messages within websites targeted at children

## **Abstract**

It is recognised that from a young age children spend considerable portions of their leisure time on the Internet. In Australia a number of child-targeted magazines have associated websites, which have high and ever-increasing readership. We do not yet know the impact of this medium upon children. Overt advertising is evident on webpages, but so too are hidden advertisements in the written text, images and games. This material usually does not comply with existing broadcasting codes of practice for mainstream advertising. This article examines the instances of overt and covert advertisements for food within three websites monitored over a 12-month period. Across this time the authors found 13 examples of overt and 39 examples of covert food advertising. In this article they focus on three example advertisements as they analyse them in response to the following research questions: What examples of overt and covert advertising are evident within websites attached to children's magazines? What messages are presented? The authors discuss the implications this advertising presents for media literacy and the critical reading strategies required by young people as they navigate their way through and make meaning from these digital texts.

## **Keywords**

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## Online Advertising: examining the content and messages within websites targeted at children

Lisa Kervin, Sandra C. Jones and Jessica Mantei

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### Abstract

*It is recognised that from a young age children spend considerable portions of their leisure time on the Internet. In Australia a number of child-targeted magazines have associated websites, which have high and ever-increasing readership. We do not yet know the impact of this medium upon children. Overt advertising is evident on webpages, but so too are hidden advertisements in the written text, images and games. This material usually does not comply with existing broadcasting codes of practice for mainstream advertising. This article examines the instances of overt and covert advertisements for food within three websites monitored over a 12-month period. Across this time the authors found 13 examples of overt and 39 examples of covert food advertising. In this article they focus on three example advertisements as they analyse them in response to the following research questions: What examples of overt and covert advertising are evident within websites attached to children's magazines? What messages are presented? The authors discuss the implications this advertising presents for media literacy and the critical reading strategies required by young people as they navigate their way through and make meaning from these digital texts.*

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Descriptions of 'digital natives', 'clickerati kids' and the 'Net Generation' suggest that children are competent when interacting with technology and online texts (Sefton-Green & Nixon, 2003; Gee, 2004; Kervin & Mantei, 2009). The danger of generational stereotypes is the assumption that they apply to all children. In this case, the stereotype implies that children use and understand technology in standard ways and with equal competence (Bennett et al, 2007). While familiarity may exist, there is a need to examine webpage content in order to consider the types of information, commercial and otherwise, young readers encounter through the Internet. It is through such examination that we might determine the level of competence they require to correctly interpret these messages.

Research before the 1990s revealed that children learn behaviours and have their value systems shaped by the media. In Australia, the content of television programming and advertising has been examined from two perspectives. The first is in regard to young children's exposure to sex, violence and bad language. The second examines the promotion of inappropriate gender stereotypes and messages. Today, however, children have shifted from spending considerable leisure time watching television to increased time with the Internet (leisure and study activities). This indicates a need to examine advertising within this context. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that in 2007-8, 67% of

Australian households had home Internet access (compared to only 16% in 1998) and 75% of households had access to a computer (up from 44% in 1998) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). A study of Internet access among families found that children (8-17 years) spend about one and a quarter hours online every day. Further, their usage increases with age, from 30 minutes for 8-11-year-olds to two and a half hours for 15-17-year-olds (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2007). Internet usage rates are even higher in the United States. For example, in 2009, 84% of 8-18-year-olds had Internet access at home (up from 47% in 1999). Of these, 33% had Internet access in their bedroom (up from 10% in 1999) (Rideout *et al.*, 2010).

## **CHILDREN AND ADVERTISING**

The intensity and frequency of children's current exposure to commercial messages regarding the categories of food, toys, clothing, movies and countless consumer goods is unprecedented. The Food Institute estimated in 2002 that \$13 billion was spent each year in the United States by the food and beverage industry alone on advertising food and drink aimed at children. Further, this figure represents only 50% of the total spent on child-targeted advertising overall (Food Institute, 2002). That is, over \$26 billion was spent on advertising to children across all product categories in 2002.

The combination of media and advertising is argued to create a 'consumer-media culture' where together they hold 'a powerful and privileged position in today's culture, society and economy' (Brookes & Kelly, 2009, p. 599). Children are an important target group for marketers. At the end of the last decade it was estimated that in the United States alone children under 12 years spend more than \$25 billion each year, and teenagers \$155 billion (Committee on Communications, 2006). This spending is increasing exponentially, with 4-12-year-olds' spending increasing from \$2.2 billion in 1968 to \$4.2 billion in 1984, and reaching \$17.1 billion by 1994 (McNeal, 1999). Children also have a powerful impact on their parents' purchasing decisions. It is estimated that the purchasing power influenced by children at the turn of the century ranged from \$200 billion (Committee on Communications, 2006) to \$500 billion (Campbell & Davis-Packard, 2000).

Middle childhood (from 6 to 11 years old) is a time of major cognitive development and mastery of cognitive, physical, and social skills (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000). Children in this age group develop from being dependent on their parents to increasing independence. This is characterised by a growing interest in the development of friendships and awareness of the world around them. Consumer socialisation – the process by which children learn how to function as consumers in the marketplace – occurs in parallel with this stage of cognitive development (McGinnis *et al.*, 2006). Without developed critical thinking skills, children are at risk of learning undesirable stereotypes and social values from repeated exposure to pervasive advertising practices (Macklin, 2003).

Children's magazines and their websites are significant in their volume of advertising. In Australia both the range of magazines targeting children, and the readership of these magazines, is high and increasing (<http://www.bandt.com.au>). Many of the top-selling Australian children's magazines have associated websites.

Opportunities to reach children with print and online magazines have expanded. In

Australia, the last decade has seen a rapid increase in the number of titles and more focused age and gender targeting of these magazines (Jones *et al.*, forthcoming). In 2002 McMahon reported that 38% of UK 7-14-year-olds identified that magazines are a source of information on what sites to visit (McMahon, 2002). It can be argued that magazines are seen in two ways. First, for advertisers, they may provide a solution to the problem of opportunities to communicate with children. Conversely, parents may see children's magazines as trustworthy in content, with reading material worthy of payment. While many parents may exercise caution with their children's online reading habits, it seems reasonable to argue that websites promoted within 'trusted' reading material (i.e. children's magazines) may be considered a dependable source.

In children's magazines, the distinction between content and advertising can be more subtle, and perhaps less obvious. These texts often carry hidden advertisements in editorials, comics, games and puzzles. Indeed, cross-advertising, merchandising and product placement have seen advertisements become a form of entertainment in their own right (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1999).

A small-scale Australian study provided 10 marketing academics (each with a minimum of 10 years' experience) with 10 pages from a top-selling children's magazine and asked them to classify each page as 'a product placement', as 'an advertisement', or as 'non-commercial content' (a 'don't know' option was also provided). It found that the 10 experts were unanimous on only two pages. For the other eight, they varied in their views of both the nature of the page (advertisement, product placement or editorial) and the intention behind its publication (information, entertainment or to generate purchase). The study concluded that if experts in the area of advertising cannot consistently differentiate commercial from non-commercial content and determine the intent of the message, it would be unreasonable to expect such a skill in young readers (Acharya & Mizerski, 2005).

For example, a study conducted with 4th and 5th graders in the United States found that only 23% recognised that branded games were advertisements (Wollslager, 2009). Further, a recent Australian qualitative study found that children differed in their ability to identify commercial content in magazines. In this study, even older children failed to recognise advertorials (or 'what to buy now') as advertising (Jones, Mannino & Green, 2010). Considering the 'bound' nature of a magazine's content (i.e. set number of pages, typical or expected content and advertising) and the relative age experience of the reader, it becomes essential to consider the implications for the unbound, unpredictable and ever-changing nature of Internet advertising.

### **Advertising in Online Environments**

Increasing rates of Internet usage and proposed moves to web-based markets by many companies in Australia and globally make this a critical issue for investigation. Children are increasingly accessing (often unsupervised) the Internet (Harding, 2004) as they read online text in their homes, schools, libraries and cafes. A recent Kaiser Foundation survey of 8-18-year-olds found the average amount of time spent online (excluding schoolwork) in a 'typical day' increased from 27 minutes in 1999 to 99 minutes in 2009, and playing video games increased from 26 minutes to 73 minutes over the same period (Rideout *et al.*, 2010). As stated above, in 2007 Australian children (8-17 years) were spending about one

and a quarter hours online every day. A 2008 US survey found that 71.1% of 6-11-year-olds had accessed the Internet in the past 30 days, and more than half (57.0%) of these children had accessed the Web 'because advertising drove them there' (Kelly, 2009).

More than two-thirds of US Internet sites designed for children and adolescents use advertising as their primary revenue stream (Story & French, 2004; Thompson, 2005). Marketers are well aware of the potential of the Internet for communicating with children and a recent US study reported that 85% of the food products advertised during children's television programming had a website either wholly or in part targeted at children (Moore & Rideout, 2007). In the United States it is estimated that teenagers account for more than \$1 billion in e-commerce dollars (Committee on Communications, 2006).

From an industry perspective, one of the key benefits of the Internet as a marketing medium is the capacity for children to register on the site (becoming 'members' or registering for free gifts or competitions). This enables marketers to track web usage and create targeted campaigns for different segments of their target audience. Additionally, Internet advertising can be substantially cheaper, due to lower entry and production costs as well as the ability to target the message and to track effectiveness (Implied by Design, 2008). Internet CPM (cost per thousand impressions) rates in 2006 averaged \$6, much less than the average \$18 CPM for television and \$11 CPM for magazines ([http://www.wikinvest.com/concept/Impact\\_of\\_Internet\\_Advertising](http://www.wikinvest.com/concept/Impact_of_Internet_Advertising)).

There is limited research on the nature and extent of advertising to children via the Internet. However, there have been some recent studies published as academics, public health advocates, and community groups become increasingly aware of the potential impact of this (currently largely unregulated) medium on children. Due to increasing concerns about childhood obesity, the research that has been conducted into Internet marketing has focused solely on *food* advertising. For example, in the United States an analysis of advertising messages on the 10 most popular children's websites identified that 13.9% of pages contained at least one instance of food marketing (Alvy & Calvert, 2008); and that over two-thirds of food company websites included advergames (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006; Weber et al, 2006). A recent Australian study of food marketing via child-targeted (non-food-company) websites and/or advertising in children's print media that refers readers to Internet sites found that two-thirds of food references were to unhealthy foods (Kelly & Chapman, 2007). Further studies have found that that food promotions are commonplace, indirect and subtle, with the majority of products being associated with downloadable items, games or competitions, and often attached to opportunities for the child to win prizes (Jones et al, 2008; Kelly et al, 2008). This reflects other mediums and even architectures (such as the layout of grocery stores). Conversely, one small-scale Australian study (examining one issue of each of the four top-selling Australian magazines) found that the majority of advertisements and product placements were for video games, DVDs, other publications, and movies (Acharya et al, 2006).

A recent content analysis of child-targeted web sites found that the majority of sites contained material which does not comply with the existing broadcasting codes of practice for mainstream advertising (Dahl et al, 2009). This suggests that interaction with online advertising exposes children to commercial messages which would not be permitted in more familiar (and more thoroughly researched and regulated) media, such as print and television.

One of the key components of the regulation of marketing to children in most countries, and most media, is the need for a clear distinction between editorial and advertising content. As discussed, previous research has shown that while such a distinction is generally clear in broadcast media, it is less clear in print media. Recent studies suggest the distinction between editorial and advertising content is perhaps even more blurred in online content. When 401 children from the United Kingdom and Indonesia were shown printed copies of mock website pages that included advertising, the 6-year-olds recognised only a quarter of the advertisements as such, 8-year-olds recognised half, and 10- and 12-year-olds about three-quarters (Ali *et al.*, 2009). Even more concerning, the 6-year-olds and 8-year-olds were no more likely to recognise the material as an advertisement when it included a price. This suggests that even these 'objective' cues that an adult would utilise as indicators of commercial intent were not informative to primary-school-aged children. Findings such as these point to the need for a renewed theory of advertising that can support children to make informed distinctions between editorial and advertising content.

Further, while the Internet has great potential as an information source and interactive games are promoted as educationally beneficial, fewer than 3% of the games analysed in a recent study of food-based advergames appeared to educate children about nutritional and health issues (Lee *et al.*, 2009).

### **Reading Demands of Online Environments**

Researchers (Coiro, 2003; Henrie, 2006; Labbo, 2006) have focused on the literacy skills students need to engage successfully with online environments. The literacy and comprehension demands of reading on the Internet are understood to be more complex and cognitively taxing than for a linear text. Internet reading requires forward inferential reading – that is, the guessing and assumptions involved in what comes next or where a hyperlink might lead the reader. It also demands prior knowledge, either in the content domain or in terms of experience in using the Internet. The reader is required to engage with a range of multimedia formats that are available, like sound, videos and photographs. And an understanding is required about the purpose of a site – that is the identity of the author and their intention in creating the text.

During online reading experiences, students engage with traditional comprehension strategies, such as locating main ideas, summarising information, inferring and evaluating. However, these skills alone are insufficient in the online environment as the reader needs to also engage with more interactive components which are not available in linear text (Coiro, 2003). Opportunities to 'point, read, think, click' (Coiro, 2003) become essential for readers if they are to critically engage with a website rather than simply click randomly or where their attention is drawn. Advertising designed to attract the reader's attention is often placed throughout these interactive components.

Online environments are complicated because of their non-linear structural and organisational design. The usability of a website influences how successfully users can navigate through the pages, find information and then return to a beginning point if needed (D'Angelo & Little, 1998; Coiro, 2003; Henrie, 2006). The ease with which a user can navigate a website and make meaning from what they see lessens the potential for cognitive overload. D'Angelo and Little (1998) in their analysis of various websites

identified criteria for good website development. These include:

- Navigational Characteristics (homepage link, help, internal/external links, menus);
- Practical Considerations (images, background, colour, sound, video, media images, content); and
- Visual Characteristics (organisation of text, use of headings, typography, white space).

These same considerations can be applied to the development and dissemination of advertising within the online environment. For instance, clicking on an advertisement has the potential to transport the reader into a new section of the site, or even a different site altogether.

The reading demands of a website alone are considerable. When coupled with online advertising, the reading load for children becomes enormous. Online advertising can employ a number of techniques to attract the reader's attention.

### ***Visual Design***

Visual design has been widely researched in relation to pictures/photographs, motion pictures, advertisements and, more recently, websites. Visual design, apart from being aesthetically pleasing, is used to create and influence culturally understood meanings made by the viewer. These influences are created through the layout and organisation of text, pictures, headings and use of space. Each of these is critical in terms of online advertising.

Authors use the layout and organisation of a text to create certain meanings and readers interpret these as they make their own. Layout in terms of visual grammar and design is recognised as critical to online reading (D'Angelo & Little, 1998; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Cranny-Francis, 2007). The placement and arrangement of text, headings, pictures, lines, links and information on the webpage influences meaning and understandings. The physical position occupied by an advertisement, coupled with its actual design, is exceptionally meaningful to the online reading experience.

The placement of an advertisement within the layout reflects its importance to the overall reading experience. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) discussion of triptychs (three compartments) does much to help us understand the positioning of advertisements on texts. Kress and van Leeuwen argue that a triptych may comprise the sections: *given*, *mediator* and *new*. The mediator remains a feature of other triptychs on text, presenting: *ideal*, *mediator* and *real* information. Understanding these three sections of a webpage and the position of advertisements on these helps the online reader understand the power of the location of the advertisement and the reading implications this presents.

Texts are typically horizontal or vertical in composition. If we consider the layout of horizontal text forms such as newspapers or magazines, information on the right-hand side of a paper or magazine would show or describe something *new* or inventive to which we should pay attention. Content on the left-hand side is considered *given*. The term *mediator* refers to information between these two polarised positions. The mediator operates to link the *new* to the *given* and sometimes makes a connection between pictures and text. Online environments follow the same rules.

In a vertical composition (typical in websites or advertisements), the *ideal* is something that may be offered to the reader, while the *real* provides details about that being offered.



Sometimes a definitive line (the mediator) is cut between these two sections. In other less dramatic displays, the mediator serves the same purpose as in the horizontal text. The reader is called to move between spaces to make meaning.

In order to read a composition using both triptychs together, the margins of these areas become further polarised, but not equal. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) discuss the importance of knowing about 'centre' in this framework. They explain that only when the centre is related to surrounding components (that is, it is a nucleus) is it considered to be central and important. Otherwise triptychs are used in conjunction with each other and the margins of these areas are examined in relation to each other.

### ***Sound***

Presence or absence of sound can influence meaning made by readers in an online environment. The use of sound can influence meanings made as the reader considers what understandings can be drawn from the sound being represented (D'Angelo & Little, 1998; Labbo, 2006). In advertising sound can quickly gain the reader's attention.

### ***Movement***

Animations include any physical movement of objects, characters or buttons designed to draw our attention when the mouse moves over the space they inhabit. The placement of the animation may also be influenced by the author's intended meaning using the visual design layout (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Cranny-Francis, 2007). In online advertising it is not uncommon to find additional information when the mouse is rolled over an image or small piece of text (e.g. word, logo, phrase). Through this kind of animation the reader is encouraged to focus on this information as their attention is drawn to the change from old information to new. The reader's eye is compelled to follow to another point, picture, word or area in the website. Further, lines can be used to separate information and ideas (Cranny-Francis, 2007). Gaze from a character or person on a website is an important aspect of movement. For example, if a character is looking in a different area of the website (i.e. moving or looking toward another area), we may assume we are being directed to focus and engage with this part or area.

## **Children and Online Critical Reading**

Online texts demand faster, more efficient reading skills to sift through the vast amount of information available. Reading is primarily concerned with meaning making and teachers are encouraged to select a broad range of authentic texts to teach the skills of critical evaluation (Leu, 2002; Harste, 2003). If literacy is learned through everyday social practices (Arthur, 2001), then viewing and critiquing online advertising becomes an essential critical reading activity. Durrant and Green (2000) encourage students to consider context, history and power by approaching all texts in a 'spirit of informed skepticism' (p. 97). So then, what does this mean and look like when the texts children encounter contain overt and covert advertisements in 'trusted' online environments? What is it they attend to in the reading process?

The ability to read critically is now promoted across the primary grades. Luke and Freebody's (1999) discussion of the reader as a 'text analyst' shows increased awareness of this important reading role. Comber (2005) supports this, observing, 'it's not reading performance which ultimately counts in children's lives but what they learn to do with

texts' (p. 6). Christie (2005) argues for the need 'to develop users of literacy who are critical and questioning about what they read, as well as discriminating' (p. 5). Blair-Larsen and Vallance (1999) emphasise the 'multidimensional thinking process' where the 'interaction of the reader, the text, and the context as readers make critical connections between their prior knowledge and new-found knowledge' (p. 37). Rather than treating text analysis as an 'inquisition' (Cramer, 1994) it is paramount that opportunities for critical reading of advertising within webpages be included in authentic literacy learning experiences to understand what it means to be an online critical reader.

Critical reading requires the reader to analyse, evaluate and respond to messages from a wide variety of media modes, genres and forms. Arthur (2001) argues that readers need to 'actively interrogate and challenge the ways that texts position readers to "take up" particular meanings' (p. 184). The Internet provides an interesting case, as readers need to critically interpret multimodal content, detect propaganda, identify bias and understand how they are being positioned by the written, visual and audio text they encounter in the digital environment. Online reading is both an active and critical process, as the reader gains greater awareness of the potential for misrepresentation and manipulation (through advertisements, the focus of this article), and understand the role of mass media and participatory media in constructing views of reality.

## METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the current study was to examine the instances of overt and covert advertisements for food within three websites. In this paper we aim to respond to the following research questions:

1. What examples of overt and covert advertising are evident within websites attached to children's magazines?
2. What messages are presented?

This article reports on three magazine websites (K-Zone, Total Girl and Just Kidding) that were monitored monthly for a 12-month period. At the time of inquiry, these were amongst the highest circulating children's magazines in Australia (see Table I).

**Table I. Highest circulating children's magazines in Australia. \*Audit Bureau of Circulations (June 2009).**

	Circulation*	Core Target
K-Zone	55,455	Boys 6-12 yrs
Total Girl	55,056	Girls 6-12 yrs
Just Kidding	163,450	Children 7-13 yrs

The magazines were selected in response to gender-considered criteria. Each website identified specific aims for the publication (see Table II).

**Table II. Publication aims.**

Descriptors of Publication	
K-Zone	<p>To discover the latest in toys, gaming, anime, sport and entertainment, more Aussie kids turn to K-Zone than any other magazine.</p> <p>K-Zone understands kids and creates a world that adults don't understand - and that's how they like it.</p> <p>Creative editorial and an innovative and ever-growing online presence keeps K-Zone ahead of the game. The magazine embraces new media and technology to develop a relationship with the big spenders of tomorrow.</p> <p>If it's cool, it's in K-Zone.</p> <p><a href="http://www.kzone.com.au/">http://www.kzone.com.au/</a></p>
Total Girl	<p>To discover the latest trends, entertainment news, cool activities and friendship advice more Australian tween girls buy Total Girl each month than any other tween girl's magazine. Total Girl understands tween girls and creates a girls only zone - a kind of secret club - that boys and parents don't understand.</p> <p>Total Girl is number one because it is always:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Fun, positive, inspiring and informative</li><li>- Funky, bright, ever-changing and stimulating</li><li>- Highly interactive and innovative encouraging reader interaction both in the magazine and online – A safe place for tween girls to read, interact and learn.</li></ul> <p><a href="http://www.totalgirl.com.au/">http://www.totalgirl.com.au/</a></p>
Just Kidding	<p>Australia's largest magazine for boys and girls aged 7-13 years.</p> <p>Each edition provides the latest on music, video games, movies, toys, books, sports, pets, puzzles, celeb interviews and of course tons of competitions!</p> <p>Just Kidding is also the only youth magazine to ban Junk Food and content of a violent nature meaning safe and happy reading.</p> <p>Being curriculum aligned, Content for Just Kidding is constantly researched with schools across the country to assist in learning development. These features are then provided in a fun and informative environment that kids, teachers and parents enjoy!</p>

Subscribe now and check out why Just Kidding is Australia's highest circulating youth magazine!

[http://www.isubscribe.com.au/title\\_info.cfm?prodID=13267](http://www.isubscribe.com.au/title_info.cfm?prodID=13267)

A diary of current links and relevant promotions on the webpages was kept, with all changes and new links noted. Any pages that contained overt or covert advertisements were printed in hard copy form and all identified materials were analysed using a content analysis framework. All researchers contributed to (and debated!) this analysis in order to agree on what constituted advertising versus 'content'. The first time a site was checked, an extensive search was made of site links, with as many links followed as possible (some promotions were hidden, e.g. a page may not have become obvious until the competition puzzle has been completed). The weekly checks were then limited to two 'drills down' from the homepage. Although a link was noted if it involved an advertisement and took the searcher out of the original website, the content of the new website was not included in analysis. A site map and count of site hits was obtained for each website. Additionally, attempts were made to gather further information about the websites from the site administrator *where possible* (e.g. target age group). Once a month, a more extensive search was conducted, again attempting to follow every link.

## RESULTS

Each of the focus sites regularly profiled food in instances of overt and covert advertising. Across this 12-month period we found 13 examples of overt and 39 examples of covert food advertising. A summary of identified instances is captured in Tables III, IV and V (note: missing months were when a site was inactive, as no updates were recorded then). For the purposes of this article we present discussion on a banner feature (K-Zone), a recipe (Total Girl) and a game (Just Kidding). These are indicative of the most common forms of advertising revealed through our analysis.

**Table III. K-Zone.**

Month and Year	Recorded 'food' instances	Code
Jan 09	'A Sweet Treat To Eat: Chocolate is sweet as' quiz (language in quiz feedback contains examples such as: 'Oh Well You must be the sort of kid who eats all their fruit and vegies! Your parents must be very proud!')	Covert
Feb 09	'A Sweet Treat To Eat: Chocolate is sweet as' quiz	Covert
March 09	'A Sweet Treat To Eat: Chocolate is sweet as' quiz Advertisement for Snak Pack Chocolate flavoured custard snack with promotion	Covert Overt
October 09	'What's hot' Kung Fu Panda at McDonalds (overview of figurines with description of each, no specific reference to food) 3D Food Fight (feature related to movie promotion, images of food presented)	Covert Covert
November 09	Meiji promotions – competitions, prizes, information	Covert

Meiji banner promotion on WebPage

Overt

**Table IV. Total Girl.**

Month and Year	Recorded 'food' instances	Code
Jan 09	Recipes (including strawberry snow pots, stacks of deliciousness, berrylicious berry puddings, barnyard biccies, chocolate overload)	Covert x 8
Feb 09	Recipes (including baked egg and ham pies with tomato salsa, spooky pizzettas)	Covert x4
March 09	Snak Pack promotion (purchase a product for the chance to win money) on both page and heading bar	Overt
	Recipes (including cherry wreaths, blooming beautiful cake)	Covert x 3
April 09	Promotion of Cooking Mama 2 game (for Nintendo DS)	Covert
	April Freebies – Cadbury giveaway one of 5 options	Covert
	Sid's Egg Decorator game	Covert
May 09	Recipes (from previous months, not updated)	Covert
	Recipes (including Selena's Mother's Day recipe, Pine-mango coconut crush)	Covert x 3
June 09	Recipes (from previous months, not updated)	Covert
July 09	Recipes (from previous months, not updated)	Covert
	Change of WebPage background to include cupcakes (2 types)	Covert
August 09	Recipes (focused on high tea)	Covert x5
September 09	Recipes (from previous months, not updated)	Covert
October 09	Recipes (including cheesy scrolls)	Covert x 2
		Overt
	Maggi biscuits (advertisement repeated in 3 places)	Overt
November 09	Banner ad for Maggi	Covert x 3
	Snow White Apple promotion (featuring apple recipes, including one for apple pie)	
December 09	Recipes (from previous months, not updated)	Covert

**Table V. Just Kidding**

Month and Year	Recorded 'food' instances	Code
Jan 09	Advertisement for Bega cheese (a brand of cheddar cheese) – contains links to 'blog', 'games', 'join the club' and 'cool stuff'	Overt
Feb 09	Promotion of Bush Fire Appeal BBQ through Blog posting	Covert
March 09	Advertisement for Doritos with competition for 'aspiring filmmakers' to make the next Doritos commercial	Overt
April 09	Promotion on dairy, includes information text, recipe, experiment and images (connection to page 27 in the magazine edition to find out about the new Yoplait go-gurt)	Covert

	and Yoplait Smackers)	
	IGA Kids club Guide to healthy living (contains recipes, activities, quizzes, competitions all promoting a healthy lifestyle) Sponsored by Nestle	Covert
	Competition ' Piece of Cake' – enter to win a VIP ticket to Melbourne's longest cake (ticket includes slice of cake, hot/cold drink and free entry into the 'cake quiz')	Covert
	Advertisement for Doritos with competition for ' aspiring filmmakers' to make the next Doritos commercial	Overt
July 09	Bega ad on homepage	Overt
August 09	Bega ad on homepage	Overt
September 09	Bega ad on homepage	Overt
October 09	Bega ad on homepage	Overt
November 09	Bega ad on homepage	Overt

### **Advertising through Webpage Banners**

A banner advertisement typically runs horizontally across the top third of a web page. In this instance, an advertisement for 'Snak Pack' (a chocolate-flavoured custard) was presented at the top of the K-Zone website. This advertisement is one example of text that is scrolled through in this part of the website. The text included within the Snak Pack advertisement informs the reader of an opportunity to 'fuel yourself and win \$10,000 plus lots of cool prizes' by firstly purchasing the product and then clicking on the hyperlinked text for more information. There is an overt message presented, in that there is money to be won; however, the use of images usually associated with health and fitness suggests that such a state is the result of consuming the product.

The physical location of this banner advertisement (horizontally across the top of the page) suggests that the information contained within it is both 'new' and 'given'. The Snak Pack logo is 'new' and is clearly presented, and the associated text encourages action (for example, 'click here' and 'win'). There is some 'given' information also contained in this area of the webpage with the inclusion of the K-Zone logo and hyperlinks to access other pages within the website (for example, Gamezone, Competitions, Fun Stuff). The background colour of the advertisement is sky blue, fading to white and gives prominence to both the Snak Pack logo (yellow, pink and white) and the K-Zone logo (green and black).

Mediator information is presented to connect the new and the given. For example, a yellow-and-black-striped bar spans the advertisement from left to right. It is labelled 'shout outs' and provides opportunity for consumers to submit comments and messages (shout outs) to others. These scroll continuously from right to left across the page, taking the eye between the new and the known as the shout outs are tracked. Interestingly, the yellow in this striped bar is the same as a prominent colour within the logo contained within the 'new' information.

Two action images are presented. These depict children participating in strenuous activity, and they surround the text encouraging consumers to 'fuel' themselves.

- Image 1: a boy playing guitar whilst jumping in the air looks directly at the audience (providing example of an appeal).
- Image 2: a young female gymnast looks directly at the audience (another example of an appeal). Below her split legs is the text 'If it wasn't for Snak Pack, a kid'd starve!!'

These images of seemingly healthy and active children appear juxtaposed by text placed underneath the initial text, 'Find us in your desserts aisle'. While neither of these images is animated, they do imply action within the illustrated activity.

### **Advertising through a Recipe**

Recipes are a regular feature of the Total Girl website, with 28 instances recorded during the monitoring period. The recipes included in these instances tend to enable the reader to engage with baking, making a snack or creating a beverage.

The March 2009 site promotes a recipe for a 'Blooming Beautiful Cake'. This recipe provides a title, images and 31 lines of written text. It is presented in a vertical layout as the reader scrolls down the page to read the information. Surrounding this recipe is a banner advertisement scrolling through a range of overt advertisements and an animated advertisement for a new Tamagotchi Game for purchase.

The top of the recipe presents the 'ideal' information. 'Blooming Beautiful Cake' is a prominent title presented in black and in bold font. Underneath is the observation that 'Veggies have never tasted so good in this sweet garden-inspired cake'. Covertly, the reader is provided with messages about food. The image of the Blooming Beautiful Cake captures the eye with its delicious-looking white icing dribbling down the sides of the golden brown cake. On top of the cake are two artfully placed frangipani flowers.

At the bottom of the recipe the 'real' information is presented. The ingredients and methods to create the 'ideal' are introduced to the reader through written text organised into bulleted chunks of text. 'What you need' and 'What to do' head the sections clearly indicating activity needed for the task.

Mediator information is given to connect the ideal and the real within the recipe. Between the image of the perfect cake (ideal) and the reality of making it (real), the magazine editors have placed a claim that 'Even your mum would approve of it!', perhaps prompting the consumer to move to the reality and proceed with creating the cake, knowing that a significant other (their Mother) would approve.

Pink is a featured colour throughout this website. The background image on the site is pale pink with a candy pink love heart motif, whilst the background of the recipe itself repeats the pale pink, this time without the motif.

### **Advertising through a Game**

Games are a common feature on the websites targeted at children. On the Just Kidding site (January 2009), the Bega Cheese (a brand of cheddar cheese) character, Sam Stringer, invites the reader to play '2 of a kind', a matching game that relies on the players remembering the placement of Bega cheese characters so that like characters can be

matched. The horizontal text contains no invitation to purchase Bega cheese, nor are there any details about obtaining the product in the advertisement, but the logo is clearly represented repeatedly.

The Bega logo sits on a yellow background (as it does when it is on a packet of cheese). 'Sam' is a yellow Bega cheese Stringer. The other characters (not named) are cheese shapes and one is an image of a packet of Bega Stringers.

The matching game holds the 'new' or 'ideal' information. Characters in the game have oversized facial features; large expressive eyes and smiles, as well as hands held high and with fingers spread to express excitement. 'Known' information is presented as Sam Stringer holds the position on the left of the screen. He is the character at the centre of the website's home page inviting users to 'Have a look around and check back for more cool stuff'. A purple rounded rectangle acts as a mediator as it creates a boundary within which Sam Stringer (the known), the game's instructions and the game (the new) are positioned.

Examples of movements can be found within this game space. For instance:

- Sam emerges from the bottom of the screen into position in the purple rectangle. His head initially moves over the instructions, then he sinks back down and the instructions 'Match 2 of a kind' are revealed.
- Links move as the mouse moves over them and change colour when selected.
- When a card is selected (clicking on it), its background fades, revealing a Bega cheese character.
- At the game's conclusion, a box appears providing affirmation of a job well done and statistics about the player's attempts (e.g. 18 moves, 40 seconds).

## DISCUSSION

The three texts analysed in this article provide examples of both overt and covert advertising of food within these websites attached to children's magazines. The banner advertisement provided a clear example of overt advertising as a product was clearly identified and promoted through logo, image and written text. The recipe and game provide examples of covert advertising through the promotion of products through activity with something else. For example, the ingredients for the recipe direct the reader to specific products as they work to create the featured food product. Subtle references are made to possible dislike of vegetables, which will be transformed through this baked product. The game provides a fun association with a food product. While no specific reference is made to Bega cheese, the reader engages with the logo and associated characters as he or she participates in a potentially fun experience.

Our analysis revealed 13 examples of overt and 39 examples of covert food advertising across these three websites over the monitoring period. Instances of overt advertising are clearly identifiable in the form of an advertisement with a distinct product that is being marketed. The higher number of covert instances presents significant implications for online reading as the distinction between content and advertising is more subtle, and less obvious. The examples we have analysed carry hidden advertisements in strategic placement of logos and images, product placement and reference, editorial comments and thematic choices (Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1999). This finding presents an original contribution to the field as we call for further investigation of the distinctions between



editorial and advertising content.

Messages are presented to the reader in each text. For instance, messages in the banner advertisement suggest it is easy to win money while also subtly connecting the seemingly unhealthy food product to physical activity. The recipe supports the reader as they transform a dislike of vegetables to a like of a baked product, with the further benefit of gaining approval from their mother. This promotes a relationship where parents encourage the consumption of a 'good' food commonly disliked or resisted by children. The physical characteristics of the characters in the game suggest that the food is fun, exciting and entertaining. Similar reflections could also be offered for the banner advertisement, with the children demonstrating excitement over eating chocolate custard.

This advertising presents significant implications for media literacy for young readers. Each example presents different classifications of advertisements that require the reader to carefully extract the content and intent of the message (Acharya & Mizerski, 2005). Creating awareness of, and strategies to deconstruct, the 'hidden messages' are necessary skills for young readers. This project is timely in that it connects with the broader scrutiny of food advertising, and it is unique in its focus on the medium of the web. It brings to light the necessity to examine interaction between the content, text, image and the experiences of the reader (Larsen & Vallance, 1999) as meaning is made and subsequent action is determined.

The ways in which the market audience is stereotyped through the use of colour, layout, language choice and activities is an interesting focus for classroom critical learning experiences. The K-Zone advertisement appears to reinforce male gender stereotypes through the placement of slime and brash language, with bold colours (black and green) to attract the male reader. The product advertised requires little more than going to a shop to purchase it. Female gender stereotypes are similarly reinforced on the Total Girl website through shades of pink and the traditionally female activity of cooking. Just Kidding appears to present a more neutral approach, using yellow and purple and characters of unknown gender. The examples shared in this article point to the need for males and females to explore stereotypes promoted about their own gender, and also to look at those aimed at the opposite sex in an attempt to promote greater understanding both between and among males and females.

Consumers of both the magazines and associated websites need to be aware of the purpose of the texts presented to them and the ways they are positioned to encourage them to take on certain beliefs or viewpoints. This is particularly significant in light of the findings about covert advertising where something more than a product is promoted, as text and image combined produce more than the sum of the parts. Specifically, young people need strategies to interpret messages embedded in these texts. such as those that tell the reader how to 'be', how to please significant others or how to attract friends and relationships, if they are to be informed and powerful consumers.

Sophisticated critical reading strategies are required by young people as they navigate their way through and make meaning from these digital texts. Each example makes use of visual design features through its position on the page, use of colour and arrangement of text and image (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Investigation of the triptychs (three compartments) of the webpage and the location of these examples within them demonstrates the position

of overt and covert advertising messages as being 'ideal' and 'new'. These texts have the potential to shape both what we know about food and how we come to gather this information.

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