









2018. Unavoidable delays in post-test data collection occurred as a consequence of unplanned school closures due to adverse weather, scheduled events, and term holidays in the school calendar.

A pen and paper based personal survey measured baseline outcomes. Prior to data collection, the questionnaire was piloted to assess the ease of interpretation of questions and to determine the average completion time (20 minutes). The researcher remained present while children completed the questionnaire to safeguard against any unintended coercion to provide 'correct' responses [60].

The study was conducted across seven primary schools in the Republic of Ireland, selection of schools was purposive, in order to include a geographic and socioeconomic spread of respondents. To increase similarity between the groups, stratified randomisation was carried out at a school level by means of paired allocation on the basis of school size. A repeated measures final sample size of 324 was achieved: 200 respondents were in the intervention group and 124 respondents were in the control group.

The Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials (CONSORT) statement guides the following presentation of the characteristics of the intervention [61]. The intervention providers were the teachers who voluntarily agreed to take part in the study. The objectives of the intervention were communicated to teachers during the process of obtaining consent from all research parties. Materials were not discussed verbally with teachers until after baseline data was collected. At this time, schools were informed of their group allocation, no masking took place. Each teacher in the intervention group received verbal instruction along with an individual lesson pack. Contained within the lesson pack was a coversheet outlining the purpose of the study, a copy of the four lesson plans, copies of the associated worksheets and four intervention record proforma. Lessons were delivered during the weeks from 01-02-2018 to 26-04-2018. The intervention was delivered with relatively high fidelity. While there was attrition in the number of lessons delivered, seven of the nine teachers delivered 75 percent of the lessons and just under half of the teachers delivered all four lessons. The intervention teaching materials can be accessed here: [https://www.safefood.eu/Education/Primary-\(ROI\)/MediaWise.aspx](https://www.safefood.eu/Education/Primary-(ROI)/MediaWise.aspx). Teachers in the control group received a copy of the intervention materials after post-test data collection was completed. The design of the study did not facilitate concealing group allocation, during the trial no placebo was administered to the control group. No changes were made after the trial commenced. By means of multiple regression modelling, the impact of a media

literacy intervention on advertising literacy was considered.

Measures of media literacy are developing [62]. The number of dispositional scales designed for children are limited. Similar to others [32], the scale employed was adapted from the work of Rozendaal et al. [22]. Those elements of their Conceptual Advertising Literacy Scale (CALSc) which did not require video as part of the data collection process, therefore measuring dispositional conceptual advertising literacy, were utilised. The initial Cronbach's alpha for the adapted scale indicated the need for refinement of the measure. Reducing the scale to six items which measured two subcomponents; 'understanding selling intent' and 'understanding persuasive intent', resulted in a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .53 pre-test and .66 post-test. These two components measure one of the two key abilities of cognitive advertising literacy as defined by Hudders et al. [24] - the ability to understand the underlying commercial intent of advertising.

This measure of conceptual advertising literacy aligns with the learning outcomes of the MediaWise intervention; 'children should be able to ... recognise the different media they encounter ...; recognise most advertising; ...; identify that advertisers pay to communicate their message [and] know the four aims of advertising; tell us something we need to know, persuade us to buy a product, persuade us to change our behaviour and put forward a point of view' [57]. Furthermore, this measure aligns well to the learning outcomes for the media education unit of the 'myself and the wider world' strand of SPHE in Irish primary curriculum [58]. Given that the measure is somewhat constrained as it was not possible to employ the entire scale and measure situational elements of persuasion knowledge, a moderate reliability of over .5 was considered acceptable [63], and sufficient to facilitate analysis. Furthermore, the Inter Class Correlation (ICC) coefficient (ICC=0.44, 95% CI [.31, .55]) indicated that the test-retest reliability of the advertising literacy measure was fair [64].

Data were analysed using SPSS v.24. Outcome measures were standardised preceding analysis. Multiple regression modelling enabled the assessment of the impact of the intervention [65] when controlling for pre-test advertising literacy scores. Covariates of gender and age were measured on nominal scales and their impact on the relationship modelled was explored by means of dummy variables. The 'class' variable acted as the covariate of age as, in line with the typical demographics of class compositions, the respondent profile indicates that younger children in the sample were in third class while older children were in fourth class.

## 4.2 Process evaluation

Qualitative discussions with children and teachers took place on school grounds directly after post-test data collection was completed. Discussions lasted on average 30 minutes. Judgement sampling was utilised to select schools to conduct focus groups with children in. Two schools that had delivered all four lessons were invited to participate. Eight children from one school and nine children from a second school took part in group discussions. All teachers who delivered the intervention were invited to take part in a depth interview. Six teachers who delivered the intervention shared their experiences in delivering the intervention. Three teachers were employed in the same school and elected to take part in a group interview. The other three teachers, from separate schools, were interviewed individually. Qualitative data were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. In line with the qualitative research objectives, data were sorted, reviewed and classified into emerging themes [66]. This process evaluation provided a rich understanding of the context for the effects uncovered in the trial.

The project received the approval of the Research Ethics Committee of Queen’s University, Belfast in November 2017. All parties – schools, teachers, parents and children - were informed and consented to take part in the research. Active consent to take part in the research was gained from the school, from the parent/ guardian, from the child and from teachers.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Sample characteristics

54.3% of the sample were girls (n=148) while 45.7% were boys (n=176). Just over half of the sample (51.5%) were in fourth class (n=167) while 48.5% were in third class (n=157). The age range of respondents was 8-11 years. The mean age of children in third class was 8.8 years (SD=.44) and the mean age of children in fourth class was 9.7 years (SD=.51).

### 5.2. Results

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for advertising literacy pre-test and post-test

Outcome	Min & Max	Total Mean (SD)	Control Mean (SD)	Intervention Mean (SD)
Pre-test advertising literacy	1,4	2.90 (.47)	2.90 (.45)	2.90 (.49)
Post-test advertising literacy (raw scores)	1,4	3.02 (.51)	2.88 (.52)	3.11 (.48)

*H1: A media literacy intervention can increase advertising literacy when pre-test advertising literacy scores, gender and age are controlled for.*

The raw advertising literacy post-test mean score for children in the intervention group ( $\bar{x}$ =3.1) is higher than for children in the control group ( $\bar{x}$ =2.9) (see table 1). Model 1 uncovers a statistically significant relationship ( $p<0.001$ ,  $f=13.701$ ,  $df=4$ ) and an Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> of 13.6% indicates that it is a relatively good predictor of advertising literacy.

After controlling for pre-test advertising literacy scores, gender and age, on average a child in the intervention group experienced a greater increase their advertising literacy score (B=.406, 95% CI [0.20, 0.61],  $p<.001$ ), therefore H1 is accepted. A Hedges g effect size of .406 compares well with earlier studies. These findings further evidence that knowledge domain outcomes can be improved by means of a media literacy intervention, reinforcing the view that children can be empowered to become media literate.

Table 2. Regression models

DV	IV	P	F	Df	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Beta (unstandardised)
Model 1		<0.001	13.701	4	0.136	
Advertising Literacy Post-Test Z Score	Intervention	<0.001				0.406
	Advertising Literacy Pre-Test Z Score	<0.001				0.317
	Gender	0.092				-0.173
	Age	0.526				0.065
Model 2		<0.001	11.034	5	0.134	
Advertising Literacy Post-Test Z Score	Intervention	<0.001				0.405
	Advertising Literacy Pre-Test Z Score	<0.001				0.366
	Gender	0.091				-0.174
	Age	0.456				0.078
	Interaction: Advertising Literacy Pre-Test Z Score * Intervention	0.498				-0.075

In contrast to the arguments which propose that gender influences susceptibility to marketing messages [50], when all other variables in model 1 were controlled for, gender was not found to have a statistically significant relationship with post-test advertising literacy scores. Similarly, although age has been identified as a pertinent covariate [31, 51; 52], as with gender, this study determines that age was not a predictor of post-test advertising literacy scores when other variables in the model were controlled for. The model depicts that the intervention resulted in a statistically significant increase in the mean advertising literacy score for third- and fourth-class children in the treatment group. Children process an abundance of information via developing cognitive resources. It is imperative that content delivered does not overload these

resources, otherwise information will be disregarded rather than processed [19]. This study detects no differences in the post-test advertising literacy scores between the classes, indicating that the materials are equally suitable for both age groups. These findings suggest no apparent need to further delineate the teaching materials employed to inform in this regard.

While the addition of the interaction term results in a model (2) that remains statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $f = 11.034$ ,  $df = 5$ ), its predictive ability (adjusted  $R^2$ ) is marginally lower at 13.4%. The interaction term is not statistically significant ( $B = -.075$ ,  $p = 0.498$ ). It can be determined that  $H_2$  must be rejected. There is no interaction between the intervention and pre-test advertising literacy scores that helps to predict post-test advertising literacy scores. The intervention is not having a greater effect for those with lower pre-test advertising literacy scores.

### 5.3 Process evaluation

Overall the programme was delivered with relatively high fidelity. During the interviews, time constraints were identified as the key reason for attrition in the number of lessons delivered. The mean lesson preparation time was 16 minutes and the mean lesson delivery time was 49 minutes. The MediaWise resource advises that each lesson should last 40 minutes, therefore the target dosage was 160 minutes. Records of intervention fidelity report that on average 150 minutes of the MediaWise intervention was delivered to classes in the treatment group.

The intervention was well received by both teachers and children. The wide variety of teaching materials was commended by both parties. Children reported that they enjoyed the lessons and wish to see more content. Children particularly enjoyed the worksheets associated with lessons and suggested presenting them in a booklet format. Teachers reported that they found the content fit for purpose, aligned to curriculum and engaging. Furthermore, they reported that the teaching resource was laid out in a user-friendly format. The characteristic challenge of competing needs in modern curriculum was acknowledged. The duration of lessons was deemed lengthy by teachers. Children became very animated when discussing media literacy. In order to reduce the length of time of individual lessons, suggestions made by teachers included reducing the content and reducing the number of worksheets in each lesson.

In the group discussions with children, knowledge of the persuasive intent and the selling intent of marketing messages was apparent. There was also evidence to suggest this knowledge was not enduring. In keeping with the MIP, as the discussion progressed in one focus group, children's affective

evaluations of marketing messages discussed superseded their initial cognitive assessments of the message sender's intent. Knowledge of advertisers' motivations and the ability to differentiate between a need and a want did not determine behavioural intention; social motivations to consume supplanted these cognitions. The complex, non-linear, relationship between cognitions, attitudes and intention to behave was apparent. The need for reinforcement of media literacy lessons was demonstrated.

## 6. Discussion, Limitations and Future Research

The aim of the study was to determine the effect of a media literacy intervention on children's advertising literacy. The findings demonstrate that the MediaWise teaching intervention is effective in increasing children's advertising literacy. Those who received the media literacy intervention experienced a greater increase in their advertising literacy scores than those who did not. The findings show that the intervention does not have a greater effect on those with lower pre-test advertising literacy scores, demonstrating that the average benefit observed is universal for children in the treatment group.

It is argued that boys and girls are socialised differently, this study finds no evidence to suggest that advertising literacy is gendered. Though children evidently learn to become consumers as they mature, it should not be assumed that consumer attitudes and skills develop in a linear fashion alongside maturity. Advertising literacy rather than age has a greater impact on consumer behaviour. Children aged between 7 and 12 are well positioned to acquire advertising literacy skills [29]. This analytical stage is key in the development of consumer behaviour as children learn to engage in a variety of decision-making strategies, evaluating multiple product attributes simultaneously. This study confirms that it is possible to increase the advertising literacy of children aged 8-11 and it finds no evidence to suggest that it is necessary to delineate this age grouping further. Having the same media literacy curriculum for third and fourth class is a suitable option.

Scope exists to revise and realign the intervention teaching materials so that each lesson time is shortened. A streamlined version of the MediaWise intervention materials will enable teachers to incorporate the intervention into their pedagogy with ease. A smaller set of core activities and worksheets could form an essential booklet, with options for extensions of extra activities or worksheets contained within the overall lesson pack.

Regulation and inoculation are insufficient responses by the adult society who have a duty to

safeguard and inform children [16] about marketing messages. Media literacy education for children that broadens its focus from the components of media, the communication process and safe online practices, to encompass advertising literacy, will promote the development of cognitive defences and logical heuristics [26]. This will enable children to make informed assessments of messages that are commonly saturated with persuasive appeals. This study documents that a media literacy teaching intervention can improve the advertising literacy of Irish primary school children, corroborating a sizeable body of evidence that argues for the inclusion of media literacy as an essential component of contemporary primary curriculum. These are important findings as research on children's advertising literacy is in its infancy [33]. Data on the effect of a school-based media literacy intervention on advertising literacy in younger children is sparse.

Reinforcement of the classroom learning that has occurred is required. An argument for media literacy lessons forming part of core curriculum is presented. A series of lessons, at regular intervals, will strengthen the learning that has occurred. Children consume a continuous stream of commercial messages. Increased conceptual advertising knowledge will help balance affective assessments of messages that can often override cognitions.

This study measured dispositional advertising literacy as is appropriate given the aim of the intervention is to develop enduring cognitive defences to advertising messages. However, measures of dispositional advertising literacy are limited. This study utilised a measure that addresses key skills of cognitive advertising literacy. While the reliability of the scale employed was acceptable, it could be improved. Further studies could aim to develop a more reliable scale that encompasses a wider measure of dispositional advertising literacy. Moreover, a longitudinal study would prove beneficial in assessing the enduring impact of the intervention on children's levels of advertising literacy and the impact of knowledge on behaviour.

### 6.1 Implications for education policy

Findings from RCTs can help inform education policy [31]. This study shows that a media literacy intervention designed to enable children to evaluate advertising messages can increase children's knowledge of selling intent and persuasive intent. This study also suggests the need for reinforcement of this learning, lending weight to the argument for including media literacy as an integral element of primary curriculum. While the benefits of media literacy are evident, it is unrealistic to expect teachers to afford more time to media literacy education when curriculum is already crowded. Recordings of treatment fidelity evidence the

constraints of the curriculum presently and the reality of attempting to adapt existing timetabled hours to include media literacy education. A compelling argument for including media literacy as core curriculum cannot be made without giving the challenge of competing needs due consideration. For change to occur, education policy modification is required to ensure that media literacy education is accommodated. As a starting point within the Irish primary education curriculum, an amendment in the directive from the Department of Education to increase the amount of time afforded to SPHE would enable those teachers who wish to include more media literacy in their teaching to do so. Moreover, if media literacy is designated an essential component of SPHE, a schoolwide collaborative approach could be adopted, similar to that of the Stay Safe programme. To maximise the potential to shape group norms in the school setting, each class could address the same unit (for example Advertising Literacy) simultaneously.

Educators can play a more central role in developing advertising literacy skills in young consumers, enabling increased recognition of stealth marketing messages and informed assessment of marketing appeals, ultimately enabling informed consumer behaviour. These findings are of interest to parties including educators, parents, policy makers and marketers.

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