

Kids are being exposed to more and more advertising with an increase in social media and digital entertainment availability. Prices of electronic devices continue to fall, getting children online and in front of a screen at earlier ages. This raises the question: Are our kids getting the right protections and teachings about advertisements and marketing to be prepared to deal with it in the real world? There is concern to be had that children are not receiving adequate education on manipulative advertising tactics and differentiating narratives from persuasive marketing. The effectiveness of media literacy and educational intervention about marketing with children, as well as regulation in place protecting children, and the overall lasting impacts advertising has on the youth are all very important topics for parents and guardians, in addition to those working with children.

Despite the beginning of awareness surrounding motives of advertising beginning as early as age 5, children are exposed to marketing even earlier than that. The American Psychological Association has found that children under age two spend about an hour every day of screen media consumption, and those ages two to eight consume an average of two hours of screentime per day (Hawkey, 2019). This does not include traditional advertising seen on billboards, newspapers, radio, and magazines. While their brains still develop, it is important to see that adolescents are even more susceptible to manipulative marketing practices than adults. Algorithms built with data collected by users have become a powerful, very relevant tool for marketing and building algorithms. Advertising has been shown to be the highest reason for children to select a specific product, over cartoons and celebrities on the packaging and toys or

gifts as a prize inside (Faria, 2023). Building up brand recognition and trust is an important marketing technique for adults and children alike, with some companies focusing greatly on the youth. Youngsters look for products and people that are like them, which branding takes advantage of (Banet-Weiser, 2017). We look to our school systems to teach our children about media literacy and the government to have regulations in place to protect the vulnerable, but the marketing around us is devious, and the companies looking to make sales know how to use their tools and techniques.

Marketers will use a variety of different techniques to best entice their audiences into making that purchase. Hidden sponsored content has become more prominent while mimicking narrative writing without clear sponsorship being shown, which children will have difficulty parsing information from promotion. Even adults can have trouble with this as there is no uniformity for different online platforms to have sponsorship labeling in the same place or posted in the same way (BRIC TV, 2016). However, this type of black ops marketing works for companies. A study by Headstream found that using storytelling to advertise a product increased the likelihood of a sale by up to 55% (2015). This is without even considering the advertising that is done to target children specifically, which has also been on the rise to the tune of billions of dollars each year, with projections reaching over \$20 billion being spent on advertising to children by 2031 (Statista, 2022). Advertisements are exposing children to harmful products early in their lives, increasing adolescent use of drugs and pushing them towards unhealthy lifestyle choices. Globally, there is also clear recognition that children and young people should

be, to the greatest extent possible, protected from exposure to marketing of harmful or unhealthy products (Powell, 2020). Influencers are no stranger to this, with individuals looking to make a quick buck using their adolescent audiences. Social tableaux marketing may not be as appealing to children but has focused on showing a happy family between television episodes to parents while trying to sell diapers and formulas promoting a joyful lifestyle (Marchand, 2000). The success companies have garnered can be seen from targeted marketing towards children, but the damage it is causing is still constantly being researched. Just last week, Connecticut Senator Chris Murphy brought up the matter of algorithms having a lasting impact on children, increasing depression and suicidal thoughts, calling for increased regulation on social media data collection for children (MSNBC, 2023). The youth need to be prepared to deal with all different forms of advertising.

There exist some protections for children online from marketers, as well as information available for teachers and caretakers. In 2009 the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) enacted the Tobacco Control Act, restricting both marketing and sales of tobacco to minors, along with other general policies around the drug (Food and Drug Association, 2020). Prior to this, tobacco had been heavily advertised to younger audiences. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has imposed protections for children online through the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA) requiring direct notice to parents of users under age 13 of websites' information collecting and distribution practices (Federal Trade Commission, 2004). This helps cut down on personalization of ads directed at minors as building profiles on them will be more difficult, if

not impossible. In Europe, the Digital Services Act (DSA) includes an embargo on targeted promotion aimed at children and prohibits algorithmic promotion of content that could be hurtful to minors, such as material related to eating disorders or self-harm (Gill, 2022). The Common Sense Media website ([commonsensemedia.org](https://www.commonsensemedia.org)) is a ratings website that offers suggestions for entertainment with considerations for age groups from other parents and guardians. For example: the recent Barbie movie has suggestions of ages 11-13 for reasons of violence & scariness, and sex, romance, & nudity. Writers also share curriculums for teaching students, such as “My Social Media Life” to assist a better connection online. With recommendations from reviewers and guides for educators, the public can decide if a show is going to be acceptable for a younger viewer and better learn about the online landscape. Media literacy and digital citizenship bills are increasing stateside to bring education of social media and general web browsing to schools as well (Arundel, 2021). Being able to safely navigate the entertainment world is very important for adolescents.

Marketing towards such a susceptible audience will often be seen as highly profitable by companies selling harmful products. Children have been the mark of advertisers selling tobacco products, vaporizers, unhealthy foods, and in some instances, blatant scams. “Although tobacco marketing has been banned from television for more than 40 years, youth exposure to television advertising for electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes) doubled from 2011 to 2013” (Lapierre et al, 2017). Vapes, or vaporizers, as well as e-cigarettes, are recently invented handheld devices used to deliver nicotine to the bloodstream akin to the tobacco products of yore. The spread of these

products has been deemed an epidemic by the American Lung Association, citing increasing evidence of health risks including lung disease and irreversible lung damage (American Lung Association, 2023). The company Juul is one of the biggest offenders of marketing these harmful drug systems to the youth. “Juul Labs Inc. agreed to pay \$462 million to six states and the District of Columbia to resolve lawsuits and investigations into the e-cigarette manufacturer’s marketing of addictive vaping products to children.” (Nayak & Larson, 2023). The FDA banned Juul products on shelves in the United States. The administration has also restricted flavors in cartridge-based reusable e-cigarettes akin to Juul, but has not acted upon disposable devices (Perrone, 2023). The government will have to continue to stay on top of the marketing practices and changes in the technology surrounding nicotine delivery devices to ensure our posterity stays healthy.

In addition to alcohol and drug marketing towards children, the fast-food industry has been pushing unhealthy meals for decades. Children are more familiar with Ronald McDonald than Jesus Christ (Londoner, 2014). Obesity continues to rise in many countries where calorie dense, nutrient poor foods and drinks are widely available. “In March of 2023, the World Obesity Federation (WOF) released a report stating that by 2035 over 4 billion people – more than half the world’s population – will be obese” (Champion, 2023). While fighting obesity will be a lifelong struggle for many, nipping it in the bud can be an effective tactic. Unfortunately, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have found that students in the United States receive less than eight hours of required nutrition education annually, while a recommended 40 to 50 hours are necessary to create behavioral change (CDC, 2023). During her husband's time in

office, Michelle Obama made strides to fight childhood obesity in the United States. “The new USDA rules would phase out the advertising of sugary drinks and junk foods on vending machines and around campuses during the school day and set guidelines for other in-school promotions, from banners hung in hallways to sponsored scoreboards on school football fields” (Fox, 2014). While the ban was a great step in the right direction, children will still see ads for junk food online and outside the school. Continued education and stricter ruling on combating this marketing to promote eating right and avoiding unhealthy decisions is necessary.

Influencer marketing involves a popular social media user endorsing and using products in front of their audiences while earning money from the producers of the product. It has become increasingly popular in the past decade outside of movie stars and politicians finding its way to microcelebrities due to the high amount of trust these people have built up with their following. While many influencers are adults, there is a rise in influencers who are still in their adolescence as well (De Veirman et al, 2019). Ryan Kaji of the Ryan’s World YouTube channel has amassed quite an audience, with over 35 million subscribers, over 45 billion views, and an estimated net worth of \$140 million. Revered for the empire built at such a long age, questions arise about the influence Ryan brings to others in his age group. Child influencers such as Ryan have changed how toy companies market their products, opening a brand-new avenue for audience building. “Nearly 9% of the Ryan ToysReview videos have included at least one paid product recommendation aimed at preschoolers, a group too young to distinguish between a commercial and a review” (Neate, 2020). The channel released a video almost every day for years, creating a

brand that was recognizable and well trusted by other children (Hains & Jennings, 2021). The US Federal Trade Commission has threatened to investigate the family over allegations of incorrectly disclosed funding. Many of the sponsorships revolve around unhealthy food and drink. “Research literature broadly suggests that understanding of the nature and purpose of advertising appears to develop between the age of 5 and 10, with 7–8 being the pivotal age where children are widely considered to become aware of the motives and methods of the advertiser” (Preston, 2016). While the FTC has put in place laws about influencer marketing requiring those material connections to be published very clearly, laws protecting child influencers are still lacking. “Right now, children online have zero protections in regard to their privacy, in regard to their labor, in regard to the income they’re generating for their family” (Lorenz, 2023). The world of influencing is still in its infancy, and regulations need to be improved to protect both the influencers, and those being influenced.

Influencers with large followings of adolescents have also been promoting gambling as of recent among some trouble on Twitch.tv and a rival streaming site Kick.com. Kick gained incredible growth shortly after Twitch banned gambling in October of 2022, with popular content creator Tyler “Trainwreck” Niknam moving to the platform to continue his crypto-betting sponsored streams (IndustryTrends, 2023). By partnering with Trainwreck, these gambling companies can ensure high yields of organic reach, allowing for a more effective and personal manner than the brand could do by itself (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Nearly half of all Twitch users are between 16 and 24 (Kavanagh, 2019), with Kick’s audience being very similar

with around 36% of users aged between 18 and 24 (Similarweb, 2023). At that age range, with some most likely dropping below that bottom limit due to youngsters trying to skate the age restriction of the site, limitations need to be put into effect to not entice the users into making dangerous, possibly lifelong decisions. The beginning of the Kick brand with such close ties to gambling plus figureheads with large followings could be an equation that leads many children towards an interest in the highly addictive form of entertainment. “Many governments have adopted a laissez faire approach to regulating the gambling industry,” and have failed to keep legislation on pace with the rapidly changing nature of the industry (Thomas et al, 2023). To the dismay of many, our governments have lacked the ability to match the speed of changing marketing techniques and evolving technologies with their updates to policy.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends children under two avoid media use altogether outside of video chatting, preschoolers are limited to an hour of “high-quality” programming each day, and grade-schoolers/teens do not let media displace important activities including sleep, exercise, social time, and “unplugged” downtime (Hawkey, 2019). As it is, there is not enough legislation in place protecting children against online marketing, and not enough education being taught to students in schools. Resources to teach minors healthy choices and ways to find appropriate entertainment exist but are in short supply. Governments need to adopt similar guidelines on marketing for gambling as they have done in the past with tobacco and alcohol, with stricter policy for unhealthy food and electronic cigarettes as well.

“Collectively, we need to critically interrogate how the commercial exploitation of children

works to deliberately and insidiously re-shape children's health, behaviours, knowledge, and identities. In this way, it does not matter so much whether the product being marketed is healthy or unhealthy in a physical sense, but how marketing encourages forms of consumption that are potentially harmful for the whole child, the planet, and children's futures” (Powell, 2020).

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