

Children and Media: The Advertising You Don't Know Your

With the rise in newer internet fads, there has been a rise in available advertisement visible to children. This is not to say that advertising has not been around for the better half of this last decade, it has and more, especially considering the inclusion of television in everyday life. For more exact numbers, a study in 2000 estimates “that children between the ages 6 and 14 watch about 25 hours of television per week and are exposed to as many as 20,000 commercials in a single year.”¹ This means, without even considering the implications of newer media and the internet, children are already constantly being bombarded by advertisements.

However, TV is heading out and streaming sites like Hulu, Netflix, and YouTube are on the rise. Statistics from a 2017 study shows that “one of every three internet users in the world is a child. [The i]nternet is becoming the main medium through which children collaborate, share, learn and play.”² This means that children are being regularly exposed to advertisements online. It doesn't matter whether those advertisements come



in the form of banners on a gaming site or a commercial between YouTube videos or a show on Hulu because advertising is advertising. However, these aren't the only places that children and teens are witnessing advertisements. Companies have had to get creative in recent years to reach the audience that had evolved with the times. An example of newer advertisements are “advergames [which] are video games created by a company with the intention of promoting the company itself or its products.”³ With all of this considered, advertising is ever-

present, and that fact should bring up several questions for parents in particular, and parents should be prepared to help inform their children of the presence of advertisements online. One of those questions is how much advertising affects

children, especially in media that has little to no regulation on the disclosure of hidden advertising like the newer advergames YouTube and Social Media Influencers.

As a parent, it is important to understand how much advertising affects children, particularly young ones. To address the issue that new media brings up, it is important to



understand why advertising was regulated in the first place along with how much it can affect children. Several studies have provided a multitude of evidence to show that “young children who are developing typically may ... be at risk for being deceived and misled in social situations” and advertisements more so than their older counterparts.⁴ This is because younger children do not yet have the “sophisticated information-processing skills” that older children have that allows them to understand what is and isn’t an ad, both on TV and on the internet.⁵ Without those skills, younger children are unable to “recognize commercial content and to understand its persuasive intent” which then leaves younger, less informed children more likely to be tricked by unfair advertising.⁶

So why does matter? As aforementioned, with the internet becoming all the more popular, companies that wish to reach young, impressionable children now have an easier place to do so. Hulu and Netflix are newer sites, yet these sites are still very similar to television.

Advertisements on Hulu do not differ that much from what one would see as a commercial while watching TV. They create fun-looking commercials for fun-looking products to convince younger children that their product is good since children are more likely to want a product if “there is compelling evidence that a product is desirable.”⁷ Hulu and YouTube, for the most part, do not have to try new tactics to

reach customers and convince them to buy certain products. This does not stop companies from attempting new routes to

get new customers. And once the focus turns to other, new advertisements online, the subject gets a lot trickier and more difficult to understand since younger children do not have high media literacy. Media literacy is one’s ability to understand media and

its messages. Children do not have a high media literacy, especially in regard to advertising, and especially in regard to new media.

In the new realm of the internet, there are two newer forms of advertisements that are more readily available and dangerous in regard to preying upon individuals who may not know better since these advertisements are often not disclosed as being

advertisements. Those are advergames and Social Media Influencers on YouTube and Instagram.

As was briefly mentioned, advergames are essentially games that are advertisements in disguise. With the internet and online gaming on the rise, companies are learning that there is a new, more effective way to reliably reach a younger audience and convince them to purchase the product being advertised. Due to this media being relatively new, very little is known about the effects of advergames. A study done in 2013



by Martin Waiguny, Michelle Nelson, and Ralf Terlutter was dedicated to finding out how advergames affect a younger audience. To do this, Waiguny, Nelson, and Ralf had half of

consenting students from a school in Austria watch an ad on TV and the other half was given an advergame for the same ad to

play. 51 students, ages 8-10, participated. From this study, Waiguny, Nelson, and Ralf were able to reasonably prove that advergaming does have a stronger effect on children than TV advertising.⁸ Specifically, the study found that “if children are highly engaged in the game, they likely have limited capacity to critically process the advergame ... Secondly, presence reduces the children’s ability to identify advergames as what they actually are – commercial information.”⁹

So what does this mean? This 2013 study shows that not only are advergames an evolved way of advertising intended for companies to reach children, but advergames are more effective at successfully reaching and convincing children that the products used in the game are seemingly better and more desirable than other products. Young children are playing games, enjoying and thinking positively about a certain product without even realizing that it is a product that they are being exposed to. Children do not understand that the game they

downloaded onto their phone or the game that they found while online are actually promoting a particular product. Advergames cause children to associate products with the happiness they are experiencing in since seeing the products in the real world trigger the happy emotions that the game produces.¹⁰ Not to mention that the younger the child, the more likely he or she will believe the product is good based on the advertisement’s visual portrayal of it.¹¹ If an advergame makes children believe a product is fun or enjoyable, even if that product is something like candy, they are more likely to desire the product.

With all this being said, advergames, although newer technology, are becoming more common. However, advergames are not the only way that advertisers are using new media to attract and reach a wide audience, especially those that are younger. One of the newer ways that advertisers have started using is both YouTube advertisements (between videos and during videos) and YouTube influencers. A study in 2018 focus on 8 social medias, one of

which is YouTube, to see how prevalent social media advertisements are in the lives of its users. The study surveyed 1,919 13 to 43-year-olds who had accounts on one

or more of the sites. This study came to the conclusion that “for YouTube, ... advertising in this platform is unavoidable and often intrusive for users; on many



occasions, users have to wait several seconds to be able to skip the ad and continue to the video content.”¹² This statement is very true; however, these advertisements between and during videos are no different than the commercials one would see on TV. It is the advertisements made by YouTube influencers that is becoming a problem, especially since those influencers do not have to disclose that the product they “love” is a paid advertisement. Why is this problematic? People, especially children, do not know what is honestly being reviewed and are not receiving good information.

YouTube influencers advertising products during their videos is not something that is unheard of. It is no different than having a character drink a Pepsi in a Blockbuster movie. The difference is that product placement in movies occurs in an obvious way that most people are able to distinguish a paid reaction from a normal one. YouTube influencer advertising is different, however, especially since YouTubers that specialize in product reviews do not disclose when they have been paid to review something and when they have not, and that lack of knowledge can be problematic. A 2018 study done by Nathaniel Evans, Mariea Hoy, and Courtney Childers tested to



see the effects that non-disclosure has on viewers. The study split its 428 adults, each with a child between 8 and 11, into 2

groups. The first set was the set that had different variations of disclosure to the audience, ranking from absolutely no disclosure to the very basic level of disclosure. The second set had full disclosure of the sponsorship that the YouTube influencer was under. The study found that when audiences were disclosed to about paid advertising, they had a more positive attitude toward the influencer and the product since there was transparency between the influencer/sponsor duo and the audience member.¹³

What does this mean? This shows that transparency creates a better attitude from the viewer toward the YouTube influencer and the product. However, this entire study is important for parents for a second reason; it brings to attention that fact that not all influencers do



disclose when they are supporting a product. Disclosure is extremely important since “secondary socialization agents (peers, the media, and celebrities) have a significant influence on both brand and product selections by adolescents,” and if those

“secondary socialization agents” convince an unknowing young viewer to purchase a product that the influencer does not truly enjoy, then the viewer

is being manipulated.¹⁴

Parents need to inform their children that just because their child’s favorite YouTube influencer says they support something does not

mean that they actually do, and having an influencer say something is good does not mean it should be purchased. A communication theory that is extremely important for understanding why these YouTube influencers have such an important influence on viewers is Parasocial Relationship. A parasocial relationship is defined as the relationship that develops

between an individual and a celebrity or TV/movie character. When an individual of any age watches videos produced by a specific YouTube influencer, especially if that

influencer acts super down to earth, the viewer begins to perceive that they and the YouTuber are “friends.” And for that reason, when the YouTuber promotes a particular product, the viewer sees a friend suggesting a product and is more likely to believe

whatever they say, especially if they do not know that the YouTuber is promoting a sponsored item.



With everything that has been stated, from the history of advertising with older media, to the newer media advertising tactics such as advergames and online influencers promoting sponsored products, advertising has been

becoming all the more powerful and present in the daily life of those that use the internet. Children are being targeted without even knowing that they are being targeted by advertising, and this sense of financial manipulation is unfair to everyone involved. However, out of everything that has been stated, the most important fact to remember for parents is the fact that children are



constantly being advertised to, and it is the job of the parents to make sure their children know what is real, and what is not. It is extremely important that children are able to understand

media and advertising now, so they are able to make smart choices about what is being presented to them when they are older. *

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