

Advertising and the Collection of Children's Data

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Gaps and shortcomings of this research

The following paper's research was found from primary, secondary, and opinions of professionals in pediatrics and the psychological impact of advertising on children. This paper does not conduct any studies itself; it is a meta-analysis and compiles information from other sources to support the claim. The findings require additional investigation, and more research needs to be done on laws that pertain to children's advertising online and the storage of their data.

Interview with Harper Reed

I met with the former Chief Technology officer of the Obama Presidency, Harper Reed, and asked him about children's protection online and what is being done about it. He told me that if we really wanted to protect children from visiting websites, they would have done something about it already (Reed). After some more contemplation, I realized that he was right. If the government and large companies wanted to protect children online, they would have done something about it already. Since it is not profitable to not exploit children, companies will not do anything about protecting them unless the government steps in. There needs to be more regulation on how children's information is stored and the methods in which they are advertised to. Since Big Tech will not do anything to change, there needs to be regulation from the government or parents to monitor their children and/or reduce their screen time. The following

research delves into detail about how advertising to children has multiple aspects to it and that ads are more targeted than previous generations.

Background

There has been advertising geared toward children since there were products to sell to them. In 2024, there have been new advancements in advertising beyond the old billboard on the highway or the commercial on the TV. Jenny Radesky, an assistant professor of pediatrics, lists some of these new forms of advertising: “...such as sponsored content, influencers, data collection, persuasive design, and personalized behavioral marketing driven by machine learning” (Digital Advertising). These are new forms of advertising that were not present in the past. An example of a new form of advertising to children is on YouTube where influencers unbox a toy and play with it. This goes against the rules of the Children’s Online Privacy and Protection Act (COPPA). Children who see these videos want to get their hands on this toy because their brains have not developed the ability to resist and acknowledge that even though another person is playing with a toy, they are being marketed to with that toy (Radesky, Digital Advertising). It is important to explain what COPPA is about. It was an act made in 1998 and put into effect in 2000. This act went over what advertisers can and cannot do when advertising to children because of how easily influenced children are. There is also a section about the storing and selling of children's personal data. This act also goes into detail about how children’s data is stored, but that is not the focus of this research.

Health and food

Not all things pertaining to children online are bad. There were six studies done between 2016 to 2018 which highlighted the importance of health education to children between the ages of 11-19. One study of 527 boys in Northern Ireland found that a quarter of them used the internet

to ask mental health questions instead of talking to someone in person (Stoilova, Livingstone 23). With this study, we can see that there is safety found in searching intimate questions online where children do not feel like they would be judged. The internet has and will continue to help kids educate themselves on topics that may be taboo, or topics they do not feel comfortable talking about to others in their life. With children on the internet, they are bound to see ads that go against a healthy way of life that they may become curious about. Many ads that are seen online are for fast food and non-healthy or unsustainable lifestyles. Such is said from a report by the University of Connecticut Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity: “Food advertising has been linked to higher obesity risk via ads for high-calorie, low-nutrient food and beverages” (Radesky, Digital Advertising). This is because ads for McDonalds, Burger King, and other fast-food restaurants are often advertised to children. Since children’s minds are malleable and easier to manipulate, they want to eat what looks intriguing and the Big Mac that is being shown to them through ads looks the most appealing. This is especially a problem in African American, Hispanic, and low-income families, as shown in the Rudd report. Nearly 40% of ads on television targeted to African American and Hispanic populations are for fast food and other restaurants (Radesky, Digital Advertising). Advertisers know that their food is cheap and people who can afford not to will eat healthier, so they target their ads to lower income populations. This problem is amplified in children because many influencers online promote sugar-sweetened beverages. There was a study that found that school aged children were more likely to eat unhealthy snacks and beverages after viewing a promotion from an influencer (Radesky, Digital Advertising). Since there is little food advertising regulation to children, companies promote unhealthy products.

Socioeconomic factors

This section will go over how lower economic status families are impacted by advertising and the collection of children's data. In a cohort study conducted by JAMA Pediatrics where they installed an app on a child's device—with the parents' consent—to track app usage and third-party domains it was reaching out to, as the child was using the device (Fangwei, Zhao, et al.). Some of the research's shortcomings was that some of the data given to the researchers was from the parents about their child, and it made it more difficult to track a child's screen time when shared with another sibling. Observations were made about how the 451 apps that were used by the children, $\frac{3}{4}$ of them collected some sort of data. That data may have included geological location, advertising ID, and other unique data types. This research was only limited to the Android operating system because Apple Store has more restrictions on privacy and tracking. Another discovery was that lower income families were more likely to own an Android than Apple. The children who had unrestricted screen time or their own devices had a higher transmission of personal data because they would use their devices more (Fangwei, Zhao, et al.). These transmissions with third party domains do not comply with the COPPA regulations, but even though there is an act in place to protect children, there is little enforcement. App creators that are a small team or a single person might now be thinking about complying with child safety when making a game for a child. Then information is illegally collected on them and then used to target ads towards them.

Ethical Considerations

Since children do not understand the difference between content and advertising, advertisers need to be aware and comply with child protection laws because it is manipulative otherwise. Children up to their teen years do not have a technical understanding of their data and it is more interpersonal (Digital Advertising). This means that they do not understand the

ramifications of letting the government or other companies collect data on them. Children and teenagers cannot be blamed for not thinking deeply about their data because in many cases, it is forced onto them. For example, Snapchat Map collects geolocation data from whoever uses it. This includes children. It allows your friends to see your location and for you to see their location. This is not a closed loop though, as Snapchat can also see and collect data from its users both underage and of age. A part of digital advertising is the collection of data. This data is used to send targeted ads wherever you are. You could be on your phone or on a website and get bombarded with ads (Radesky, The Digital World). When Radesky was a child growing up in the 1980's the ads were predictable. They would be shown on the television and a thirty-second ad would be played. Now that ads can be targeted and are no longer only on the TV, children can be directly manipulated. Data collection on children is used to track their interests, dislikes, and habits online (Radesky, The Digital World). All this information allows advertisers to persuade and indirectly influence children and their purchasing habits. The results have not been conclusive because they are still being worked on. The research is done by watching children online and how their behavior has changed throughout their childhood years to their teenage years. The ethics of collecting personal data to advertise to kids violates already existing acts such as COPPA.

Policies and their Shortcomings

Policies have been put into place to protect children from aggressive digital marketing. Some of these policies fall short of the intended goal and make it more difficult for creators and website owners. As previously stated, COPPA was written in 1998 and has not been revisited since 2013. The intentions were good when it was first instated, but ever since 2013 the digital

landscape has changed and became more connected through different social media and new algorithms, all meant to track people. An example of COPPA in action was in 2019 when YouTube was hit with a \$170 million dollar lawsuit from the FTC—Federal Trade Commission—for the breach of this law. The focus of this lawsuit seemed to be that it was the biggest sum of money ever collected using COPPA (Beemsterboer). All that was done on YouTube's end was make a button that asks the creator if this content is made for children. Now that YouTube has this feature for kids, COPPA will be enforced on the website users instead of on the website. For example, on YouTube you could be hit with a COPPA violation if you claim something is made for children but later deemed not to be appropriate by YouTube. What is deemed inappropriate for children is not clearly mentioned in the act and is loosely defined. This act needs to be revisited and updated.

Another act that was put into effect around the same time was the Children's Internet Protection Act, or CIPA. This act was put in place for schools and libraries to receive discounted internet access and internet infrastructure for the school or library. The school needs a filter to block obscene, pornographic, and harmful-to-minors content. There also needs to be monitoring for students on the internet and the school needs a course on educating minors about appropriate behavior online (FCC). This is a step in the right direction. Even though it is difficult to protect all minors online, schools are a great place to start. This will allow adults to actively protect children online in a school setting with monitoring and filters. On top of protecting children online, the school or library will receive discounted internet services for putting these rules into place.

As of March 21, 2024, Pornhub has been banned in the state of Texas for not having a stricter way of who is allowed on the site (Addison). This is because of law makers attempting to limit adult content to minors. Originally, the state forced the site to implement an age verification

method, but they refused so they decided to completely pull the site out of Texas. Instead of having a method to verify the age of someone, the site decided to completely turn off their servers in Texas to protest. This is a good sign that lawmakers are finally cracking down on adult content to children, but more work still needs to be done.

Conclusion

After examining multiple studies about how children are affected online by advertising, the evidence asserts that there needs to be more regulation on children's media and advertising without negatively impacting creators. There are acts and laws in place, like COPPA and CIPA, that are supposed to protect children's advertising ID's, however it is only followed by certain companies. Smaller developers also do not think about these laws when developing their games. The laws in place need to be better enforced by having websites use a more intense way of checking someone's age or not allowing apps and websites to run if they do not comply. Additional research can be done concerning parents limiting the amount of time their child spends online; the best way to reduce collecting data on children is to not have the child online or monitored by a trusted adult when they are online.

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