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Slimy tactics: the covert commercialisation of child-targeted content

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ABSTRACT

There are growing concerns about the commercialisation of childhood and the consequences of marketing to children, including marketing's negative effects and increasingly sophisticated and potentially deceptive online tactics that permeate the contemporary media environment. Children and young people are prolific users of video-sharing platforms (VSP) such as TikTok and YouTube, yet little is known about children's advertising literacy within these contexts. Therefore, this paper answers recent calls for a deeper understanding of children's advertising literacy in light of their increasingly digital lifestyles. A combination of qualitative, participatory creative methods were used with children aged 9–11 from the UK. Findings show that despite their negative perceptions of online advertising, children place a level of trust in video-sharing platforms, based on a misconception that the commercialisation of content is always disclosed. This is concerning because children may prefer and pay more attention to content that they believe to be genuine.

Introduction

Over time, continuous innovation in new technologies has dramatically changed the marketing landscape. One outcome of this evolution has been the explosion of more covert forms of advertising. Influencer marketing, where prominent figures are paid to promote specific products or services to their followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019) is an increasingly popular method of targeting children on video-sharing platforms (VSPs) such as YouTube (Rasmussen et al., 2022) and TikTok. In contrast to traditional techniques, covert methods are personalised, highly immersive and potentially harder for children to recognise because they are deliberately designed to 'blend seamlessly into everyday discourse' (Freeman & Shapiro, 2014, p. 45). Only a handful of studies have started to unpack consumers' understanding of influencer marketing and disclosure cues (De Jans et al., 2019; Eisend et al., 2020) and most have been conducted with adults (E. van Reijmersdal & van Dam, 2020).

Research into children's processing of disclosure cues has been conducted on advergames (Verhellen et al., 2014) social games (Rozendaal et al., 2013) and personalised

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advertisements on social media (Zarouali et al., 2018). However, advertising disclosures on VSPs have only recently garnered attention (Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2020; E. van Reijmersdal et al., 2020; van Dam & van Reijmersdal, 2019). Therefore, the current study is one of the first to explore children's understanding of commercialised content on these platforms.

First we provide an overview of the literature, including a review of YouTube and TikTok. We then outline our research methods, before presenting key findings and discussion. We conclude the paper by identifying marketing and policy implications.

Literature review

Research has attempted to address concerns that children are more vulnerable to commercial persuasion (Spotswood & Nairn, 2016), more at risk of being misled by marketing communications than adults (Eagle, 2007) and are 'uniquely' susceptible to the effects of advertising and marketing because of their limited cognitive abilities (Kunkel et al., 2004, p. 1). In other words, because children may not understand the commercial intent of advertising in the same way that adults do, they are unable to defend themselves against 'unethical manipulation by advertisers' (Nairn & Dew, 2007, p. 32). There appears to be widespread agreement that until they reach the point of adolescence, children's understanding of advertising and marketing is less sophisticated than that of adults (Friestad & Wright, 1994).

Over 98% of children aged 8–15 use a VSP such as YouTube and TikTok (Ofcom, 2022) where content is often heavily integrated with advertising (E. van Reijmersdal et al., 2020). Despite this, little is currently known about children's interactions with commercially-motivated YouTube videos beyond the statistics relating to time spent online and type of device used (De Jans et al., 2018; De Veirman et al., 2019; Folkvord et al., 2019) and research into commercialised content on TikTok is virtually non-existent.

YouTube

YouTube's popularity has increased significantly in recent years among 8–11 year olds, with just under half preferring to watch YouTube content over television programmes (Ofcom, 2022), favouring videos that relate to their offline interests, such as music, make-up, sports and pranks (De Jans et al., 2018; De Veirman & Hudders, 2019). Children also enjoy 'sensory' videos, such as watching others make and play with slime because they feature "satisfying noises" (Ofcom, 2019, p. 36). Indeed, 'slime' appears to be a highly profitable commodity, with some 'slime entrepreneurs' earning thousands of dollars a month from advertisements on YouTube videos (Parkinson, 2018, n.p.). Influencers typically receive a free product in exchange for a positive review or are paid for the promotion in the hope that it will influence the opinions of their followers (Rasmussen et al., 2022). Paid-for/sponsored VSP posts typically include an element of product placement or verbal promotion, and this is particularly salient in the case of videos relating to toys, which are still 'central to children's play' (Jaakkola, 2019, p. 1). Hence, slime videos, toy reviews and toy 'unboxing' videos have

evolved into a highly effective method of marketing new toys to young audiences (Marsh, 2016).

TikTok

TikTok is now the fastest growing social media app in the world (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020), overtaking YouTube as the most popular app with UK children (Ofcom, 2022). Media commentators suggest that this is the result of TikTok's efficient algorithms that learn the type of content users like and suggest new videos based on what they have already watched much faster than rival social platforms (Tidy & Smith Galer, 2020). Evidence suggests that the majority of TikTok's user base is preadolescent children, despite the application's 13+ age restriction (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). When a TikTok challenge or trend goes viral and is well received by users then the associated brand can also experience increased popularity and sales as a result (Vaynerchuk, 2020). TikTok's growing popularity with young audiences means that many brands are now eschewing traditional marketing techniques in favour of promoting their products to children via engaging content on the app (Vaynerchuk, 2020).

Appeal of VSPs

Young consumers are particularly responsive to products that they have seen online (De Jans et al., 2019) because they find the subtle nature of embedded marketing less irritating and consider influencers to be experts in their own field (Rasmussen et al., 2022). It may be possible to explain the commercial success of covert marketing on VSPs in terms of affect-transfer mechanisms. Affect-transfer suggests that consumers' perceptions of an advertisement influence their attitude towards an advertisement, which in turn can influence their attitude towards a brand (Mitchell & Olson, 2000). MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) suggest that consumers' favourable attitudes towards a brand are influenced by their attitude to the advertisement itself rather than their perceptions of the brand. Hence, research should explore the specific content characteristics that make advertisements entertaining and appealing for children (De Jans et al., 2017). Both traditional and digital marketing methods attempt to entertain and use emotion to appeal to children (Nairn et al., 2008), yet insights here are lacking (Sanchez-Fernandez & Jimenez-Castillo, 2021). It is plausible to suggest that popular videos may be more effective at persuasion than unpopular ones, because positive effects associated with watching an entertaining video could be transferred onto a featured brand or product without children realising it (Buijzen et al., 2010), meaning that they fail to recognise that such content is advertising at all, which raises ethical concerns over deception (van Dam & van Reijmersdal, 2019).

Disclosure cues

As influencer marketing becomes more prevalent, embedded and cost-effective on VSPs, the lines between commercialised and entertainment content are becoming increasingly blurred and harder for children to distinguish. UK guidance for social influencers states that content should include clues or hints that a post has been

orchestrated in some way to promote a particular product, place or service (Advertising Standards Authority UK, 2022). Referred to as disclosure cues, these include the use of #ad, #paidad and/or #sponsored and are often the only evidence that seemingly genuine content is actually commercially motivated (De Pauw et al., 2018). Previous research has validated that consumers must see a cue in order to recognise something as an advertisement (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019) and including the word 'advertising' within a disclosure can trigger recognition (Eisend et al., 2020). However, to be effective in communicating commercial intent, cues not only need to be noticed, but 'consciously processed' (Krouwer et al., 2017, p. 125). Few studies address children's responses to the ways in which commercial intent is communicated (Eisend et al., 2020) and studies into different disclosure formats (i.e. verbal, textual or visual) report mixed results (Kay et al., 2022). Where disclosure cues are missing or hidden, then paid-for endorsements can appear genuine (Kay et al., 2022). If commercial messages are highly integrated with the content, for example in sponsored YouTube videos (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018) the persuasive intent will be harder to recognise, which in turn is less likely to trigger critical processing (Buijzen et al., 2010). Furthermore, where the persuasive intent is made more conspicuous with the presence of a disclosure clue, customers may react more negatively towards the featured brand (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019; van Dam & van Reijmersdal, 2019) which may deter influencers from being transparent about their commercial motives and may potentially mislead consumers.

Understandably, important questions have been raised over the ethics of allowing children to be exposed to misleading marketing that they may not be able to recognise and understand. There have been calls for new research to better understand children's marketing literacy in today's digital society (Nelson, 2018). Therefore, the current study answers this call by exploring children's understanding of contemporary marketing techniques on VSPs, through addressing the following research question:

RQ: What are children's perceptions of covert marketing on VSPs?

This question seeks to address the imbalance in previous research, which has mainly focused on children's recognition of the *purpose* of commercial material (De Jans et al., 2017) by focusing on their perceptions of commercial material itself. In light of the increasing integration of entertainment and commercial content (Oates et al., 2016) it has been argued that children's content should be scrutinised more closely by researchers and advertising policy makers alike (Jaakkola, 2019; Nairn et al., 2008). Our study contributes here by specifically focusing on children's perceptions of covert commercial content that may not trigger advertising recognition, and introduces an innovative methodology.

Methods

We designed a qualitative approach for several reasons. First, we recognise 'children as people with abilities and capabilities different from, rather than simply less than, adults' (James, 1999, p. 246). Second, the nature of this research was exploratory, with the aim of generating new insights rather than testing existing theory or assumptions. Third, we

were keen to adopt an 'adventurous' methodology as suggested by James (1999, p. 492) to engage children, so that 'research *on* childhood can be effected through research *with* children' (original emphasis).

Participants

This research was conducted in 2021 with 41 children aged between 9 and 11 years from a school in a city in the North of England. This age group is in line with previous research in this area (De Pauw et al., 2018). It was expected that these children would be able to read simple product/brand names and information, but would not yet have developed the complex, adult-like processing and associated scepticism of an older age group (Moses & Baldwin, 2005). It was also anticipated that these children would have some experience of using YouTube and TikTok.

Ethics and procedure

Approval for the study was granted by the ethics committee at the researchers' institution. The lead author liaised with the school's safeguarding officer and obtained an enhanced disclosure from the Disclosure and Barring Service prior to commencing the research. Children were asked directly to give their consent to participate in the study and permission was also sought from a responsible adult (Economic and Social Research Council, 2022). We chose to use a 'child-friendly' (Heath et al., 2007, p409) creative, visual workshop method, in phase one of the research.

Phase one: YouTube video storyboarding task workshop

Children were asked to work in small groups to choose a brand from a list generated by participants in an earlier workshop task to *'come up with a cool idea for a YouTube video that would persuade the rest of the class to try or buy the brand/product that you have chosen'*. Participants were given blank storyboards and a supplementary template to help them plan their video. Ideas were then presented back to the group and discussed. This task required children to think like marketers and create their own advertising materials 'within the scope of their everyday lives', which may give a better indication of their understanding compared to recognition-based questions alone (Nelson, 2016, p. 171). All the children chose to feature themselves in their videos as opposed to famous influencers/celebrities, with 'real-life' scenarios and humour considered to be critical to the success of YouTube advertising strategies. Semi-structured interview protocols were developed based on these insights.

Phase two: friendship group interviews

We interviewed 30 children from phase one in small groups. Friendship interviews have been recommended where topics relate to media use (Eder & Fingerson, 2001) and have been used in similar studies (Jones & Glynn, 2019). Friendship interviews also minimise the

possibility of participants feeling under pressure to provide a 'correct' answer, as they can help each other out, further reducing the power imbalance between researcher and participants (Eder & Fingerson, 2001).

Data analysis

We followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) guidelines for reflexive thematic analysis. Children's discussions during the YouTube storyboarding task and friendship interviews were audio-transcribed verbatim, with supplementary field notes added to aid analysis. Significant terms were given a descriptive or 'in vivo' code (Saunders et al., 2020), the meanings of which were further interpreted and given analytical codes (Saldana, 2016). Analytical codes were clustered together to unify our findings (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019) and build our overarching theme; 'evaluation'. Participants' quotes are anonymised according to the code W = workshop, IT = interview, P = participant.

Findings and discussion

Children's perceptions of commercialised content on VSPs

Participants expressed the view that advertising – in its most recognisable form – is somewhat unavoidable. Many participants described how they felt that they were 'always' coming into contact with advertising in their everyday lives, particularly online, yet they were almost exclusively referring to clearly demarcated advertisements as opposed to covert, embedded formats. YouTube descriptions were rarely read, meaning that if disclosures were written here they would likely be missed. Where content contains a verbal disclosure cue to communicate that it is explicitly 'sponsored' all participants were able to recognise this as advertising and many expressed a desire to 'skip' or 'scroll' past such content. In circumstances where they were unable to do so they felt frustrated. For example, as one participant described:

'if they're sponsored they [the videos] *usually stop half way through just to like carry on with the energy drink or something what I don't even care about, I just try and skip it until it goes . . . it's just so boring like, I don't want them to show me about this thing that I'm not into . . . ' W3P4*

This sense of 'annoyance' caused by over exposure to advertising was shared by many participants. When asked questions as to *why* they found advertisements annoying, one significant reason was the feeling of being unable to 'opt out' of watching or listening to something irrelevant or repetitive, which were common features of the YouTube advertisements discussed. Children also described frequent interruptions online, recognising that online or in-app advertisements interrupt gameplay in the same way that advertising on television breaks up an entertainment programme, demonstrating an awareness that online advertising can reduce the functionality of the content they are consuming.

Far from considering themselves as vulnerable consumers, participants appeared to have good faith in their own advertising literacy skills and their perceived abilities to recognise when someone was trying to sell them something or persuade them to take action online (such as clicking on an external link, reposting content to their own profiles or by following a specific brand). Participants were able to describe various features of

YouTube such as 'skip ad' on screen and the use of a red line (to indicate the time left on a video) where the video was an advertisement.

At first glance, it could be discerned that children's increased exposure to advertising online has increased their advertising literacy for online formats. However, this confidence in recognising online advertising appeared to be based on two key misassumptions. One, that online advertising has to tell you that it is advertising and two, if it doesn't tell you it is advertising, then it is not, as exemplified in the quotes below:

> *'It would probably be quite hard to tell* [it was advertising] *if it didn't say, but I'm pretty sure it has to say (.) like if someone's advertising something then they have to say it's advertising, like if they don't then I'm not sure what happens but I'm pretty sure they have to say it's advertising' IT12P1*

> *'If it's persuading something to me it will have the brand somewhere on screen* [on YouTube] *and I don't think it's hard to tell (.) they* [advertisers] *list the good features of an expensive item and I don't think it's hard to tell if someone's advertising (.) they'll say it's good, or buy this now or it won't say anything. If it was advertising it would be trying to persuade you to buy stuff now' IT5P2*

In reality, children's awareness of influencer and embedded marketing (i.e. non recognisable) on YouTube and TikTok was poor. This supports previous research suggesting that children have low levels of advertising literacy for covert techniques online (E. A. van Reijmersdal et al., 2017; Lawlor et al., 2016). This is concerning because our analysis also suggests that children have a clear preference for content that they do not *perceive* to be advertising even if it actually is. In line with previous research, children felt that 'non-sponsored' content was more authentic and genuine and therefore would pay more attention to it (E. A. van Reijmersdal et al., 2017). Participants struggled to describe advertising on TikTok, which could be because children have not yet become familiar with the format of the application in the same way that they have become accustomed to YouTube.

> *'on . . . other platforms apart from TikTok, like YouTube and on apps, it's quite obvious because it takes you off of your game, and shows you like an ad for a different game, or on YouTube it shows you an ad for a computer or something . . . but on TikTok most of the time they're giving you an ad, well they might not be giving you an ad, it's quite hard to tell because they put their own ads like in their own TikToks, which I don't find that as advertising (.)' IT12P1*

Indeed, fewer participants accessed TikTok compared to YouTube, but a number of participants had accounts despite being below the recommended age at the time of the research. It appears that it is relatively easy for children to provide a false date of birth in order to download the app and the age-verification procedure is not very robust.

An overall theme that emerged during analysis, *'evaluation'* brings together insights into how children interpret the commercialised information they encounter online and how they evaluate diverse exchanges of value as part of their navigation of the marketplace. It was particularly interesting to us that in the absence of advertising recognition, children appeared to use certain characteristics of 'non sponsored' VSP content to decode underlying commercial agendas. We categorise these characteristics separately, according to message, source (i.e. the influencer) and product. Each characteristic is presented below.

Message characteristics

In line with previous research findings, participants demonstrated a level of scepticism towards overly positive sentiments within content (Nairn et al., 2008), with a view that quite often, games and toys in particular failed to live up to the marketing hype. Participants perceived online advertising as inherently unrealistic and believed that advertisements typically 'make things look better than they actually are' in reality. This was particularly salient in the case of gaming advertisements, insofar as many participants felt that they had been hoodwinked by misleading or deceptive advertisements. As such, in the absence of a disclosure (i.e. when interpreting seemingly genuine game or product reviews) participants had a tendency to equate excessively positive messages with the possibility of commercial intent. Participants also discussed the characteristics of messages such as the inclusion of a direct call to action (i.e. to purchase something or click on an external link) as being an indicator of possible commercial intent in the absence of an advertising disclosure.

> 'If I saw something on social media, I would know it would be persuading me to buy something because there would be pictures of people wearing clothes that says come and buy this dress I made' IT5P3

Source characteristics

Analysis revealed that children have a desire for 'realism' in the content that they consume online. This was reflected in their preferences for 'day-in-the-life' type videos, 'life hacks' or videos that featured child-targeted products in real life settings, with 'real' people across VSPs. This quest for authenticity was also evident in discussions around the way that advertisers typically target consumers online. Authenticity in this context relates not only to the presentation of games and apps but also to commercial representations of products and other items, such as food and toys. However, authenticity as it was understood here related to the distinct absence of commercial motives, rather than an influencer's transparency over their partnerships with brands or financial incentives (Audrezet et al., 2020). All of the participants chose to put themselves in their YouTube videos, as they believed that children would be more receptive to content produced by other children of a similar age. Sharing similar interests and activities with the influencer were also important for both platforms. This could explain why participants perceived user-created content as inherently more appealing than paid-for advertising.

Product characteristics

Children are particularly receptive to content on VSPs that features a product that relates to their offline interests. Furthermore, analysis suggested that the perceived 'newness' of a product enhances its appeal. Content that emphasised how products serve a social function as opposed to being practically useful were also more appealing to participants. However, when it came to evaluating whether or not something was worth purchasing, participants had a tendency to judge the advertised experience versus their own or their peers' prior experiences with similar products. This links back to the perception that

advertising tends to exaggerate product features. It was particularly intriguing to analyse how the participants' diverse descriptions of their pre-purchase decision making processes revealed an underlying practice of quite sophisticated, reflective and critical thinking. For example, when discussing the types of things that they typically bought with their own money, participants made references to self-questioning behaviours such as: *Will I use it? Do I really need it? Am I wasting my money?* and ultimately, *Is it worth it?* This is a novel finding, as few studies with the exception of Nairn et al. (2008) explore this element of children's marketing literacy.

Conclusion

The aim of the research was to investigate children's perceptions of covert marketing on VSPs. Whilst children demonstrated a high level of awareness of different marketing formats, this primarily related to traditional techniques, such as television advertising, although more established online methods such as pop-up advertisements and pre-roll video advertisements on YouTube were described. Advertisements on YouTube were mentioned as frequently as television advertising, which could reflect how the traditional and digital methods for viewing entertainment content have converged over time.

Exposure to commercialised content has become a regular feature of children's experiences online. On the one hand, overexposure may have enhanced children's marketing literacy for more obvious forms of online advertising. On the other hand, overexposure appears to have decreased their tolerance for advertising, which when recognised, is viewed as intrusive, disruptive and annoying. Despite negative perceptions of online advertising, children do place a level of trust in VSPs, based on the misconception that the commercialisation of content always has to be disclosed. This is concerning because they prefer and pay more attention to content that they believe to be genuine. They also perceive messages from sources that they relate to or that they identify with as more credible. However, in the absence of recognition, where selling or persuasive intent is deliberately disguised, then children may still be able to interpret the commercial agenda. As Jaakkola (2019, p. 2) asserts 'content that encounters such massive popularity should be taken seriously and included in discussions of media content to better understand what constitutes it'. This research is in its infancy, yet reinforces our argument that the characteristics of child-targeted content should be scrutinised more closely by researchers.

Implications

These findings have implications for other scholars in this area, policymakers who regulate online advertising and marketers who have to balance their need to sell products with a duty to ensure they are not deceiving customers. We make three recommendations. One, that researchers should focus more on the characteristics of the content itself to strengthen decisions made on advertising policy within the UK. Two, that the advertising industry considers introducing standardised disclosures for commercialised content on VSPs to reduce the ambiguity that currently exists. Finally, marketers should endeavour to embed socially responsible thinking into all of their marketing practices and not rely solely upon VSP's content moderation strategies and current age restrictions.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The purpose of this paper was to highlight the issue of the commercialisation of content on video-sharing platforms. As an exploratory study, our findings are indicative, yet we have emphasised the potential value of exploring the characteristics of contemporary content when researching children's marketing literacy. Since our findings are based on children from a single school, future researchers could examine content with a larger sample to enhance the insights presented here. Commercialised content on VSPs is just one example of covert marketing that children encounter in their everyday lives. Children also spend a lot of time playing games online, many of which involve the integration of commercial messages and brand placement with gameplay (Vyvey et al., 2018). Future research may wish to explore the links between gaming and advertising in more depth. Finally, our findings are based on a snapshot in time. We recognise that technological developments on VSPs are inevitable and therefore researchers should continuously revisit this topic as marketing techniques evolve.

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