Advertising Ethics and Age-Appropriate Content
PRAD 563: Media Planning
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Introduction

The marketing strategy that is advertising plays an omnipresent role in our society. Every day, advertising influences our choices, perceptions, and behaviors and although the marketing strategy is extremely beneficial and lucrative to businesses, a question of advertising ethics and age-appropriate content comes into question. Due to the digital age we live in, children younger and younger are being exposed to copious amounts of advertisements, some of which are not age appropriate. Therefore, this paper will explore key issues surrounding advertising ethics when it comes to age-appropriate content via historical context, background research, survey findings, and personal reflection. Through this analysis, this paper will argue that addressing concerns with advertising in the digital age and ensuring age-appropriate content to children will require a multifaceted approach that involves collaboration between advertisers, caregivers of children and governmental legislation.

The basic definition of ethics, according to Merriam-Webster, is the "principles of conduct governing an individual or a group" ((Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The definition of advertising, also according to Merriam-Webster, is "a paid notice that is published or broadcast (as to attract customers or to provide information of public interest)" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) In 1984, the American Advertising Federation formulated their "Principles of American Business" to provide somewhat of a foundation of advertising ethics. These principles include: truth, substantiation, false comparisons to other companies, no bait advertising, explicit stating of guarantees and warrantees, no false price claims, competent witness testimonies, and taste and decency (Snyder, 2003). Age-appropriate content, in the context of advertising, means content is tailored for a particular age group based on their developmental level. For children, age-

appropriate content could include advertisements centering around relevant cartoons/tv shows, toys, games, books, clothing, shoes etc.

Historical Context of Advertising to Children

To understand the ways in which children are advertised to, it is helpful to examine the history of advertising to children. There are two main eras that can be focused on for historical context of advertising to children: early 20th century, mid 20th century.

In the early 20th century (1900's-1950's), consumerism was on the rise as was the emergence of mass media. The main forms of advertisements in this time were newspapers, magazines, billboards, and radio. Lisa Jacobson, author of *Raising Consumers,* notes that "by 1928, magazine advertisers were reaching approximately 12 million children, ranging in age from 10-20" (Jacobsen, 2004). The emergence of radio advertising was specifically interesting in that it was now a form of communication that could be listened to rather than read, which eliminated issues of literacy.

Simultaneously at this time, the development of child psychology was happening. By the 1930's, advertisers began to use advances in child psychology to their advantage when it came to advertising to kids. By examining child psychology, advertisers realized that children develop through stages, and they can be advertised to based on their age experiences and preferences. This also had advertisers viewing children as competent consumers versus inexperienced consumers. Due to advertisers having a new target market in children, they began to get creative. Before, advertisements to kids were limited to just toys and games, but now there was an expansion of product categories from toys and games to food, clothing, and entertainment.

Advertisers also got creative in their techniques now that children were involved. This included advertising through catchy jingles, mascots and storytelling. An example of advertising in story telling was companies like Heinz and Palmolive writing children's stories which incorporated and showcased their products (Duke University Libraries, n.d.). Food companies such as Campbell Soup, Quaker Oats, Kellogg and General Mills would advertise towards children via radio dramas and adventure shows in the thought the children could influence their parents to buy the food products (Alexander et al., 1998). This period did not go without criticism. Lisa Jacobson notes that "many early 20th century Americans found children's consumption unsettling because it raised profound questions about what constituted a protected childhood in an age of mass culture and mass consumption" (Jacobson, 2004). Even as early as the early 20th century, older Americans found advertising to children to be alarming in some respects.

By the mid 20th century (1950-1970), the world saw the emergence of television and commercials, which completely revolutionized the advertising industry. Three major television networks were established during this time: NBC, CBS, and ABC (O'Barr, 2010). William M. O'Barr, author of *A Brief History of Advertising in America*, notes that television was "entertainment on a scale unknown before" (O'Barr, 2010). By the mid 1950's, television advertisements via commercials had become engrained in American culture. During this time was also the beginning of the baby boomer generation, as more couples were getting married and having children. The economy was also extremely stable during this period which allowed American families to participate as consumers. These aspects of American life in the mid 20th century contributed to children being a perfect target market for advertisers.

Companies launched ads for many products including toys, cereal, candy, and snacks. The ads were produced in either live, animation, or jingle form. Mark Munn, the author of *The Effect of Parental Buying Habits on Children Exposed to Children's Television Programs*, states that "children influenced parental purchases in nine of ten homes" (Munn, 1958). Partnerships between brands and kid's characters were also powerful advertising strategies. An example of this was the popular kid's character Howdy Doody partnering with milk flavoring product Olvatine. This led into the creation of mascots to represent brands during this period. Examples of this include Tony the Tiger representing Frosted Flakes Cereal, the Trix Rabbit for Trix Cereal, and Ronald McDonald for McDonald's fast-food restaurants (O'Barr, 2010).

This time also saw the emergence of iconic Saturday Morning Cartoons such as The Flintstones and The Jetsons. This is significant because majority of households only had one television, therefore adults and children were usually watching the same programs throughout the week. However, with the introduction of Saturday Morning Cartoons, advertisers now had a block of time to advertise their products just to kids. Most of the advertisements were centered around toys and breakfast cereals and some brands would even sponsor the cartoons and weave in their ads so that it was hard for children to distinguish between the commercial and the actual show. An example of this was a cartoon by the name of Linus the Lionhearted. The program ran on CBS from 1964-1965 and was sponsored by General Foods Post Cereals who created the character of Linus to sell their cereals. The shows was centered around adventures of Linus and his friends, who were all mascots that represented other flavors of General Post Cereals. For example, the character Sugar Bear representing the cereal "Sugar Crisp" (TV Tropes, n.d.). Therefore, the entire cartoon was an advertisement for the cereal and children could not even spot this.

Overall, advertising to children during the television era of the mid-century was so lucrative that the Federal Communications Commission explained that "Programs for Children" was one of the 14 major elements needed for broadcasters to meet their public interest commitment (Alexander et al., 1998).

Secondary Research

Advertising to Children in the Digital Age

To understand how advertisers interact with children in our current era of the "digital age" it is important to look at how advertisements are conducted, targeted, and consumed. There are a plethora of channels and platforms used to advertise to children in the digital age. These include social media advertising (Facebook, Instagram, X, Snapchat, Tik Tok), search engine advertising (Google Ads, Bing Ads), Display advertising (ads on websites and mobile apps), video advertising (Youtube), email advertisement, smart device advertising (Google Assistant, Amazon Alexa), and traditional media advertising (television and radio). The mediums children use to access these platforms range from cell phones, computers, tablets, smart devices, televisions, smart watches, portable gaming systems etc. Depending on the exact age of the child and which medium they have access to, some platforms will be more popular than others.

In terms of how advertisers know just how to target children, data mining is used. Two popular factors of data mining that are used by advertisers to target children are cookies and profiling. An article from 2017 entitled *Data Protection and Privacy Under Pressure*, authors Vermeulen and Lievens describes the concept of cookies as "information is transmitted via the cookie from a server to a web browser of the user and back each time the user accesses a server's page using the same browser" (Vermeulen & Lievens, 2017). In addition to using cookies, many

companies will use profiling. Profiling is an "automated process to examine large data sets in order to create classes or categories of characteristics" (Vermeulen & Lievens, 2017). Advertisers will then take this information and then develop profiles of people, places, or things. For example, Facebook "uses data it collects about underage users to create profiles of young people with harmful or risky interests such as 13-17 year olds interested in smoking, gambling, alcohol, or extreme weightloss" (Williams, McIntosh, & Farthing, 2021). The ads then shown on Facebook to children ages 13-17, for example, include a spicy cocktail recipe (alcohol), an ad with a thin young women wearing a bikini asking if the audience is "summer ready" (extreme weightloss), a young girl holding a vape (smoking), and an ad asking the audience to swipe up in order to win prizes (gambling).

As of 2023, Statista states that "youtube, video-on-demand, and social media topped the ranking of channels with the highest reach both among youngsters under 12 and among teenagers" (Statista, n.d.). Some examples of child geared advertisements on these popular channels are as follows. An immensely popular YouTube children advertisement campaign came from the channel by the name of "Ryan ToysReview". The channel focused on a young boy named Ryan Kaji who would unbox and review toys for other children to watch. It did not take long for the children watching Ryan on Youtube to start asking their parents for the same toys and merchandise. Because Ryan's channel has millions of subscribers, any toy brand featured on his channel was getting brand exposure and an increase in sales ("Ryan's World," n.d.). A video-on-demand advertisement campaign geared toward children was for the movie Trolls World Tour. DreamWorks launched advertisements on streaming services in the form of trailers, banners, and was in the recommended to watch section. DreamWorks also partnered with streaming services to advertise the movie with behind-the-scenes features, interactive

games, and music videos (The Verge, 2020). Lastly, the company LEGO launches extremely

popular children advertising campaigns on social media. The social media platforms used by

LEGO to advertise to children are mainly Facebook and Instagram. The brand will post videos

and pictures of children playing with the Legos and building amazing and colorful creations with

the blocks. The captions to these pictures and videos garner excitement and engagement

surrounding the whole experience of buying a LEGO set and building it into something fun.

Some of their campaigns also encourage LEGO users, majority children, to upload their LEGO

creations onto social media and share what they've created via branded hashtags (The Drum,

2022).

In summary, advertising to children in the digital age presents a complex landscape, with

a variety of platforms and sophisticated targeting techniques. From YouTube channels, to movie

promotions on streaming services, to engaging social media campaigns, companies and

advertisers effectively reach young audiences. However, this raises ethical concerns about

privacy, data collection, and the impact on children's wellbeing.

Existing Child Advertisement Regulations and Guidelines

In terms of existing regulations and guidelines regarding advertising to children, there are

several. These include the development of the Federal Trade Commission, Children's Online

Privacy Protection Act, and the Children's Advertising Review Unit which operates under the

National Advertising Review Council.

The Federal Trade Commission was created in 1914 and is a "major regulatory body in

the U.S. which examines issues of fairness in advertising (Zinkhan, 1994). Their overall mission

is to protect the public from deceiving or unfair business tactics and unfair competition methods through law enforcement, advocacy, research, and educational initiatives. The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act also known as (COPPA) was enacted in 1998. This legislation bars unjust or misleading actions or behaviors concerning the gathering, utilization, and/or revealing of personal data pertaining to children online (Federal Trade Commission, n.d.). Lastly, the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU) aids companies in adhering to regulations and standards that safeguard children under 13 from misleading or unsuitable advertising. CARU also ensures responsible collection and handling of children's data in online settings (BBB National Programs, n.d.)

These regulatory frameworks, coupled with ongoing advocacy efforts contribute to promoting responsible advertising practices, but are they enough?

Key Ethical Concerns & Age Appropriate Advertising Arguments

When it comes to the key ethical concerns for age-appropriate advertising, there are many. These range from impact on the child's wellbeing, privacy and data collection concerns, vulnerability of children, advertisers using deception and manipulation, and regulatory compliance. Many would argue that the child's wellbeing is of upmost importance when it comes to advertising. When not engaging in age-appropriate advertising, companies can be promoting unhealthy food and lifestyle, to an unrealistic body image, to violence, to an increase in materialism. Some examples of this would be having coke branded vending machines inside of schools and the reading incentive program Pizza Hut started in which children were given a monthly Pizza Hut coupon if they reached their monthly reading goal (Mutugu, 2014). These are

unhealthy food and drink choices that are being marketed to kids as generally safe when collaborating with educational institutions.

In the context of data and privacy concerns regarding children. Children generally do not have as much media literacy or competency as adults do. Children cannot often comprehend that their privacy and data are being taken from them and monitored in order to give them targeted ads. Being influenced by personalized algorithms during developmental years can be quite dangerous in that the children are not giving their consent for companies to have access to them in the ways they do. This can also lead into another ethical concern of not having age-appropriate advertising in that children can be vulnerable and easily persuaded in one direction or another. When advertisers use tactics and tools to target children, they are influencing the preferences of a young mind who isn't old enough to understand these concepts yet. Another ethical concern surrounding advertising to children is if advertisers and companies are following the regulations of the acts and organizations mentioned in the above section. One aspect of this is that the above organizations are American based regulations. Therefore, they are little to no help when a global advertiser is advertising to kids, especially in the digital space. In her 2012 article entitled *The FCC's Sponsorship Identification Rules*, author Jennifer Fujawa notes how the regulations in place for advertising are outdated. She states that "the obviousness and reasonably related exceptions provide opportunities for modern advertisers to take full advantage of the system, so that more embedded advertisements are exempted from disclosure law than are covered by it (Fujawa, 2012).

Despite the numerous ethical concerns surrounding non-age-appropriate advertising, there are some who would argue in favor of not using age appropriate advertising. Some of these could include freedom of speech concerns, economic impact, and unintended consequences.

When deciding who to advertise to based on age, some could argue this is a freedom of speech issue. Looking at advertising as a form of expression in this way could make regulations on it seem as though rights are being infringed upon, specifically the first amendment of the United States. Secondly, some could argue that when age restrictions are put on advertisements, the economy could be impacted. By cutting out advertisement departments centered toward children, jobs could be lost. Not having the influence of children on a family's purchasing power could have a negative impact on the economy. Lastly, some could argue that putting age restrictions on advertisements could have unintended consequences. These unintended consequences could be that advertisers will find even more sneaky and covert ways to unleash advertisements onto children and therefore, giving children media literacy lessons may be a better route to go.

The above secondary research presented provides substantial support for the thesis that addressing concerns with advertising ethics and ensuring age-appropriate content necessitates collaborative efforts among advertisers, caregivers, and governmental legislation. The exploration of various digital advertising channels and platforms highlights the pervasive nature of advertising targeted at children in the digital age. Techniques such as data mining, including the use of cookies and profiling, underscore the need for regulation to protect children's privacy and well-being. Furthermore, the existence of regulatory bodies like the FTC, COPPA, and CARU demonstrates the importance of governmental oversight in protecting children from misleading or unsuitable advertising practices. Lastly, parents can play a vital role in controlling their children's exposure to age-appropriate content and mitigating the potential negative impacts of advertising.

Primary Research
Methodology

I distributed the survey by typing the questions into a word document and emailing the document to the five participants and asked them to save the document with their recorded answers and email it back to me. The survey was conducted on a sample size of five people. Participant #1 was a mid 20's, straight female, no kids, Participant #2 was a mid 20's, straight female, no kids, Participant #3 was a 27-year-old, straight female, two kids, Participant #4 was a 27 year old, gay male, no kids, and Participant #5 was a 69 year old straight female, three kids. These participants were chosen because they are my friends and family. All participants completed the survey making the response rate 100%.

The survey questions asked to participants were as followed:

1. To what extent are you concerned about the influence of digital advertisements on children's behavior and perceptions towards what they want to buy or how they view themselves?

Completely/somewhat/a little/not at all

2. In your opinion, to what extent should advertisers ensure that their digital ads are suitable for the age group they target?

Completely/somewhat/a little/not at all

3. How much control do you believe parents or caregivers should have over the types of digital ads their children are exposed to?

Completely/somewhat/a little/not at all

4. To what extent do you think there should be measures in place to regulate the content of digital advertisements aimed at children?

Completely/somewhat/a little/not at all

5. Have you ever felt uncomfortable with the content of an advertisement when watching TV or browsing online with a child present? If so, to what extent did it bother you?

Completely/somewhat/a little/not at all

Summary of survey findings

The results of the survey findings were as followed:

Question #1:

Participant 1: Somewhat
Participant 2: A little
Participant 3: Completely
Participant 4: A little
Participant 5: Completely

Question #2:

Participant 1: Completely
Participant 2: Somewhat
Participant 3: Completely
Participant 4: Somewhat
Participant 5: Completely

Question #3:

Participant 1: Completely
Participant 2: Somewhat
Participant 3: Completely
Participant 4: Somewhat
Participant 5: Completely

Question #4:

Participant 1: Completely
Participant 2: Completely
Participant 3: Completely
Participant 4: Somewhat
Participant 5: Completely

Question #5
Participant 1: Completely
Participant 2: A little
Participant 3: Completely
Participant 4: Completely
Participant 5: Completely

Overall, the findings suggest a general consensus among participants regarding the need for appropriate regulation of digital advertisements aimed at children and the importance of parental control over the content that children are exposed to. There were some variations in the level of concern and agreement among participants, but the majority expressed at least some level of concern and support for measures to ensure the suitability and regulation of digital ads for children.

Personal Perspective

Writing this paper only reinforced a fundamental belief I've held that children should be protected in every way possible since they are the most vulnerable people in our society. By doing research on the history of advertising to children, I saw how children were turned into consumers right as industrialization and capitalism began to boom. This is unsettling to me because advertisers played a part in commercializing childhood instead of allowing one of the purest life stages to be just that. The expansion of product categories and the use of persuasive tactics like catchy jingles and mascots highlighted the frightening power the advertisers held. In today's digital age, where advertisers bombard children with products, the ethical concerns are more pronounced than ever. Learning about data mining techniques like cookies and profiling used to target children with personalized ads was particularly alarming. The idea that young individuals, lacking the skills to fully comprehend what's happening around them, are targets of manipulative strategies is upsetting.

Exploring the regulations in place highlighted the importance of keeping such measures but also updating them so that they function correctly. The evolving digital landscape presents new challenges that governmental bodies need to keep up with. Through the survey findings, I

saw shared concerned among participants regarding the influence of digital advertisements on children's behavior and perception. The general consensus on the importance of parental control and regulatory measures reaffirmed my belief in the collective responsibility of society to safeguard children from potentially harmful content.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has explored the landscape of advertising ethics, with a particular focus on age-appropriate content and its implications in the digital age. Beginning with a historical overview of advertising to children, I traced the evolution of advertising tactics from the early 20th century to the mid 20th century to the digital age. I examined the multitude of channels and platforms used by advertisers to reach children, including social media, video streaming services, and online video platforms . I also explored the ethical concerns surrounding data mining techniques and the potential impact on children's privacy and vulnerability. Furthermore, I discussed existing regulations and guidelines aimed at protecting children from inappropriate advertising content, such as the Federal Trade Commission and the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act. While these regulations provide a framework for ethical advertising practices, there is a need for continual updates and enforcement considering the rapidly evolving digital era. The findings of the survey reinforced the importance of parental control and regulatory measures in ensuring the suitability of advertising content for children. Most participants expressed support for measures to protect children from potentially harmful advertising.

Addressing concerns with advertising ethics and ensuring age-appropriate content will require a collaborative effort between advertisers, caregivers, and governmental legislation. By

collectively working towards this goal, we can create a safer and more ethical advertising environment for children in the future.

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