MARKETING TO CHILDREN THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA

Trends and Issues

Wonsun Shin

Introduction

Digital media have become an integral part of children’s lives. Marketers recognise the access that digital media offer in terms of reaching young consumers, and they actively harness digital platforms to appeal to this market. While digital media offer unprecedented opportunities for marketers to target children, however, some of the current youth-directed digital marketing practices have raised concerns. For instance, branded environments provided by online, social, and mobile media often blend commercial and non-commercial content, making children susceptible to the persuasive intentions of marketers. The interactive nature of digital media also increases the possibility that children will disclose personal information to unknown others, including marketers. Overall, the new generation of consumers and media users faces unique challenges that previous generations have not seen or experienced.

Defining ‘children’ as anyone under the age of 18, this chapter considers children as consumers in the changing media environment and examines how digital media pose new challenges to this consumer segment. It begins with an overview of what is known about children as consumers and media users and the theoretical perspectives underpinning the knowledge. It then explores how children are constructed as marketing targets in the digital age and addresses growing concerns associated with current marketing practices. The chapter concludes by identifying gaps in the current understanding of marketing to children through digital media and highlighting areas for future research.

Children as Consumers

Children constitute a lucrative market in several respects. First, although children may not be the final decision-makers for household purchases, they substantially affect their caregivers’ buying decisions. Three out of four parents in the US report that their children influence family purchase decisions (Viacom, 2018). According to a survey conducted with children aged 6–13 in Australia, about 4 out of 10 children ‘help their parents decide’ clothes for themselves (38.1%), DVDs (37.8%), toys (35.5%), and fast food (35.3%) (Roy Morgan, 2016). Another reason that children are an important consumer segment is that they represent future consumers. Marketers promoting adult products often reach out to children, with the hope that children will develop
their brand preference at an earlier age and become lifetime consumers for their brands. Toyota’s ToyToys mobile app (‘Backseat Driver’) and McDonald’s Happy Meal are good examples of such marketing practices, also known as cradle-to-grave marketing.

With an increase in dual-income households, smaller families, and more permissive parenting practices among the younger generations of parents, today’s children learn to be active and competent consumers who are proactive about what they want and persistent in pursuit of their needs, using various persuasion techniques – from begging and pestering to bargaining and negotiating with their parents (Hawkins, 2016). Children on average make approximately 3,000 requests to their parents for products or services per year (Schor, 2004). Their persuasion tactics, often referred to as ‘pestering power’, are known to have substantial influence on the spending decisions of parents at a global scale (Calvert, 2008).

However, children are also viewed as vulnerable victims of commercialisation who are easily persuaded or ‘manipulated’ by marketers to pursue products that they do not need or which may have detrimental effects on their physical and psychological wellbeing (Lapierre, Fleming-Milici, Rozendaal, McAlister, & Castonguay, 2017). Extensive research has demonstrated positive links between children’s exposure to fast food, alcohol, and tobacco ads and their favourable attitudes toward the consumption of those products (Wilcox et al., 2004). Excessive commercialism through marketing messages is also associated with materialism in young people, leading them to ascribe greater importance to the acquisition and ownership of material goods (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003).

The answer to the question of ‘whether children are active agents or victims in the commercialised world’ is not straightforward, as children’s consumption-related attitudes, skills, and behaviours are shaped by various developmental and social factors (Hawkins, 2016). Regarding the role of cognitive development in children’s responses to marketing, a general consensus has been that children’s age (maturity) matters. It is more difficult for younger children to understand the commercial intentions behind marketing messages, as compared with older children, due to their limited cognitive capability. For example, according to the American Psychological Association (Wilcox et al., 2004), children under the age of seven tend to have difficulty comprehending the true purpose of advertising. As they grow older, they become more critical about marketing practices and no longer believe that advertising always represents the truth. This line of thought has been influenced by age-based developmental-stage models, including Piaget’s four stages of cognitive development (1970), Selman’s theory of perspective taking (1980), and Roedder-John’s model of consumer socialisation (1999).

Aside from the level of cognitive development, the social environment in which children grow up and learn social norms and proper conduct plays a crucial role in their responses to marketing practices (Roedder-John, 1999). The theory of consumer socialisation (Moschis, 1978) has long been applied to examine and explain the process by which children acquire and develop consumption-related knowledge, skills, and behaviours through their interactions with socialisation agents, which include parents, friends, schools, and media. According to the consumer socialisation perspective, children’s interactions with socialisation agents result in an array of outcomes. For instance, the degree to which children and parents engage in critical discussions about advertising practices can reduce children’s vulnerability to advertising (Buijzen, 2009). On the other hand, children’s frequent interactions with peers and excessive use of media can make them less critical about marketing practices (Moschis & Churchill, 1978).

**Children as Media Users**

These unique and influential young consumers are also avid media users; they spend considerable time on diverse types of media. In addition, the amount of time spent on media tends to increase
as children grow older. According to the Australian Institute of Family Studies (2015), children aged 4–5 spend 2.2 hours per day on screen media. This increases to 3.3 hours when children reach the age of 12–13. Another important trend in children’s media use is that they rely heavily on digital media, and this trend is steadily increasing. Eight out of ten teenagers aged 14–17 in Australia think that the internet is extremely/very important to them (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2013). Ofcom’s survey with children in the UK (2017) found that children aged 5–15 spent 15 hours and 18 minutes per week on the internet in 2017, which represents a dramatic increase from 2007 (9 hours and 42 minutes). Pew Research Center (2018) shows that 45% of teens in the US are online almost constantly, which is almost double the rate from the 2014–2015 survey (24%).

Social media in particular represent important parts of young people’s digital media routine. In Australia, almost all online teenagers aged 14–17 use social media, engaging in such activities as posting status updates, sending messages, tagging others, and joining groups (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2013). Children are also increasingly mobile. Teens’ access to smartphones increased from 73% in 2014–2015 to 95% in 2018 in the US (Pew Internet Research, 2018). Across eight different countries (Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Portugal, Romania, and UK), 71% of children aged 9–16 use their mobile phones to access the internet and 81% of these kids use social networking services on mobile phones (GSMA, 2014).

Digital Marketing to Children: Issues and Concerns

Inspired by the mounting potential of digital media to reach this younger consumer group, marketers have employed various strategies to appeal to digital youth. Well-known examples of marketing strategies directed to young consumers include brand websites with interactive features, advertising displayed on those websites, brand placement embedded in digital content, advergames (i.e., online or mobile games created by a marketer to promote a specific brand), social media advertising, and branded mobile applications. Given that children spend excessive amounts of time on social media and mobile devices, this chapter focuses on marketing practices utilising social and mobile media.

Social Media Advertising

A key characteristic of social media as a marketing communication platform is that they allow marketers to ‘target’ specific consumer groups using the demographic characteristics, interests, and online activities of the users. These pieces of user information enable marketers to offer personalised promotional content to different consumer segments. Users’ personal information is collected through their voluntary disclosure to social media (e.g., information they provide to join a social networking site), as well as through their digital footprints (e.g., what users see and do on their social media profiles and other websites). Social media retargeting (i.e., exposing a social media user to an advertisement promoting a product or service that was shown on a previously visited website) is thus a widely used marketing strategy to target both adult and teen social media users (Zarouali, Ponnet, Walrave, & Poels, 2017). Let’s say that a teen Instagram user visits an apparel brand’s website, browses, and clicks on a few items there. If the apparel brand is a client or ‘partner’ of Instagram, the user’s behaviours on this apparel website will be known to Instagram through a cookie. When the same user later visits Instagram, he or she will be ‘retargeted’ by advertisements promoting the products shown on the apparel website. In other words, marketing messages are personalised based on consumers’ individual online behaviours.

From the marketers’ perspective, personalised marketing content is a logical choice, as it results in more positive outcomes as compared with non-personalised content, including more
favourable attitudes toward the marketers and greater purchase intentions for the advertised brands (Zarouali et al., 2017). Consumers are more likely to perceive personalised content to be relevant and useful as compared with non-personalised content, as the former is in closer keeping with their current lifestyle, context, and interests (Tucker, 2014). However, more precisely targeted personalisation requires a greater degree of personal information from social media users. In other words, users may have to sacrifice their privacy in exchange for personalised offerings. A problem is that young consumers often underestimate the risks associated with information disclosure and tend to share a wide range of personal information on social media (Madden et al., 2013). The fact that they often have difficulty understanding how their information is collected and used by social media platforms and other third-party marketers puts young social media users at greater risk.

Another concern associated with social media marketing targeted at youth is that many of the promotional messages, including personalised advertising, are blended into the users’ social media profiles, blurring the line between commercial and non-commercial content. This is known as social media newsfeed ads, referring to advertising messages that appear within users’ personal feeds. Social media newsfeed advertising is a type of native advertising – paid advertising that matches the look, feel, and function of its surrounding editorial content. According to eMarketer (2018), native advertising like newsfeed advertising constitutes the main source of revenue for social media companies.

Another type of native advertising popular among marketers targeting digital youth is influencer marketing (De Jans, 2018). Influencer marketing refers to a marketing practice in which marketers work with social media influencers (i.e., individuals with access to a substantial social network of people following them and the power to influence the followers’ opinions and behaviours) to promote their brands (Folkvord, Bevelander, Rozendaal, & Hermans, 2019). It is considered native advertising because it allows marketers to blend their promotional messages into the content created by the influencer (van Dam & van Raimersdal, 2019). When social media influencers work for (or are ‘sponsored by’) marketers, they endorse the marketers’ brands by featuring the brands as part of their social media stories (Coates, Hardman, Halford, Christiansen, & Boyland, 2019). Because the brand stories are seamlessly integrated into the influencers’ social media posts, young consumers are less likely to view the stories as marketing messages (Coates et al., 2019). Furthermore, social media influencers are often viewed as friends or friendly experts (Folkword et al., 2019). Given that young consumers tend to be vulnerable to peer influence, brand messages endorsed by ‘peer’ influencers are more likely to be considered authentic and credible as compared with the overt forms of advertising (De Jans, 2018).

Consumers are more likely to view, share, and click native advertising compared with more overt forms of advertising like banner ads (Folkword et al., 2019; Marketing Land, 2016). However, because native advertising, such as social media newsfeed ads and influencer marketing, obscures the distinction between advertising and non-advertising content, it is also considered a misleading and deceptive practice (Taylor, 2017). The organic form of native advertising on social media is less likely to activate young consumers’ cognitive defences to cope with persuasion, possibly leading them to be less critical about such marketing practices (Zarouali et al., 2017).

Lastly, most of the established social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, etc.) require their users to be 13 or older to join, in order to comply with the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA) (Office of eSafety Commissioner, 2016). However, Ofcom’s (2017) survey indicates that about half of children aged 11–12 have social media profiles. This means that many young children who are not supposed to use social media can be exposed to age-inappropriate content, including marketing messages targeting older consumers, through their social media use.
Mobile Marketing

Mobile devices offer a variety of tools for marketing, including SMS (short message service), push notifications, mobile applications (apps), in-app advertising (ads that appear on mobile webpages or in apps), QR (quick response) codes, and location-based advertising. As an increasing number of children and teenagers own mobile devices and rely heavily on those devices to undertake a wide range of activities, marketers actively utilise mobile technology to reach young consumers (Common Sense Media, 2014).

Advanced tracking technologies, as well as the prevalence of GPS- and wi-fi-enabled mobile devices, have empowered marketers to identify and monitor the locations of their target consumers and to deliver customised advertising messages based on their current locations. Using geo-location data from young consumers, marketers deliver location-specific promotions – for example, sending ads or coupons when children are around particular stores or restaurants (Common Sense Media, 2014). Marketers also encourage children to ‘check in’ at fast food restaurants and to share that information via social media (World Health Organization, 2016). These tactics are about targeting children at the right time in the right context.

However, location-based marketing targeted at children raises two important concerns. First, it targets children when they are most vulnerable to marketing messages (World Health Organization, 2016). This is likely to make children less analytical about promotional messages and more likely to lower their guard. Given that location-based marketing is often used by fast food brands to target kids (World Health Organization, 2016), its impact on children cannot be underestimated. Second, location-based marketing involves personal data, including the users’ current location. In short, users’ privacy is at risk. Wang, Yang, and Zhang (2015) note that many advertisers that utilise location-based advertising collect extensive personal information from mobile users without providing clear explanations for how the data will be used.

The collection of personal data and the intrusions into consumer privacy that are commonplace among marketers are particularly pressing issues regarding mobile apps targeting children. Apps often collect an array of personal information and seek ‘permission’ to access the user’s ID, contact list, address book, calendar, network connections, camera, and storage associated with the mobile device. For example, the Minecraft mobile app, a popular mobile game for children and teenagers, requests access to users’ contacts, phone, storage, and full network connections to other users (Google Play’s Minecraft page, n.d.). The Instagram mobile app, one of the most popular social networking sites among teenagers, demands access to users’ camera, contacts, location, microphone, phone, SMS, storage, Bluetooth setting, and network connections on their phones. Many other widely used apps have similar requirements and yet the Federal Trade Commission’s (FTC) survey of mobile apps targeted at children in 2012 showed that only 20% of these apps provided a link to a privacy policy available to parents (FTC, 2015). This improved three years later, with more than 45% of kids’ apps including links to their privacy policies on their app store pages in 2015 (FTC, 2015). Nevertheless, according to the FTC (2015), those apps do not provide easy enough access for parents or young users themselves to learn about how user data are collected and used. That is, while mobile marketers collect extensive personal information from young mobile users, they are not diligent in protecting the privacy of those consumers.

Another concern related to mobile marketing targeted at children is that it often forces children to view advertisements and nudges them to spend money on virtual goods. When children use free-to-play mobile apps to play games, for example, they are often required to watch or click in-app ads to earn game money or skip to the next level. They are also prodded to make in-app purchases for a variety of reasons – to access extra functions, unlock the game’s full features, get new accessories or abilities for their game characters, buy rare items, speed up the game’s progress, or enjoy the
game without advertisements. These kinds of marketing practices may induce materialistic attitudes in children, leading them to associate money with solutions (Opree, Buijzen, & van Reijmersdal, 2013). While in-app purchases represent the primary revenue source for mobile marketers (Business of Apps, 2018), they can also result in parent–child conflict. Numerous news reports have covered accidental and expensive unauthorised purchases made by children across the world, like a seven-year-old child who spent £4,000 on a *Jurassic World* in-app purchase (Daily Mail, 2015).

**What Is Known: a Summary of the Current Knowledge**

Overall, the literature shows that children are many-sided consumers. They are influential consumers with great indirect buying power. They are also active agents, persistent about what they want and strategic about the manner in which they fulfil their consumption needs. Children are also ardent media users, and digital media constitute a substantial part of their lives. In response to these characteristics, marketers aggressively target young consumers using numerous digital marketing tools. However, the literature also suggests that children, especially younger ones, are susceptible to marketing influences due to their limited developmental capacity and consumption experience. Current digital marketing practices appear to put children in a more vulnerable position, as outlined below.

- **Privacy intrusion**: Just as adult consumers are targeted through data-driven marketing, young consumers are also targeted through online tracking, location-based and behavioural targeting, and retargeting strategies. Zarouali et al. (2017) show that retargeted Facebook ads lead to greater purchase intention among adolescents compared with non-retargeted Facebook ads. That is, content personalisation through online tracking ‘works’ to attract young consumers. However, children often input various types of personal information when they join social networking sites or download and use mobile apps without understanding how their personal information is collected and used by marketers. This raises important concerns regarding privacy.

- **Covert advertising**: Young consumers who spend extensive amounts of time on social media are exposed to various forms of covert advertising such as social media newsfeed advertising and influential marketing (Lapierre et al., 2017). These forms of advertising integrate commercial messages into non-commercial content and obscure the line between advertising and neutral messages. Research suggests that covert advertising can be effective when it is considered nonintrusive by viewers (Lee, Kim, & Ham, 2016). However, the subtle nature of covert advertising makes it difficult for young consumers to understand that they are being targeted by marketers (Lapierre et al., 2017). It can also lower consumers’ persuasion knowledge, making them less critical about marketing practices (Taylor, 2017).

- **Ad-induced materialism**: When engaging with digital media such as app-based mobile games, children are exposed to ongoing pressure to spend money to enjoy better digital experiences (Kelion, 2013). This can foster a materialistic orientation in children and cause parent–child conflicts. Unauthorised spending on in-app purchases can also result in a significant financial loss for children and parents.

- **Exposure to inappropriate content**: The prevalence of underage social media use is also concerning in that it can expose young children to commercial content that is not appropriate for their age.

**What Needs to be Known: Gaps in Current Understanding**

Despite the importance of children as consumers and media users, as well as various concerns associated with digital marketing directed at children, there are many gaps in the research literature.
Gap 1. The Lack of Understanding Regarding Age Differences in Children’s Recognition and Understanding of Digital Marketing Strategies

The aforementioned age-based cognitive developmental models, as well as the conventional views regarding children’s understanding of advertising (e.g., children aged five can distinguish advertising from television programmes) emerged in the pre-digital era, when digital media was largely foreign to children. Given the dramatic changes in the consumer and digital marketplaces over the past few decades, the existing theories and models may not adequately explain today’s children.

Currently, little is known regarding the relationship between children’s age and their ability to recognise and understand digital marketing practices (Common Sense Media, 2014). A deeper understanding of those issues, such as “when children recognise native advertising as a form of marketing communication” and “when they understand how personalised advertising works” will help policy-makers assess the fairness of different forms of marketing communications targeted at different ages of children (Common Sense Media, 2014). It will also help parents and media educators to develop age-appropriate educational programmes to enhance children’s digital marketing literacy.

Future research needs to shed light on age-related differences in children’s recognition and understanding of various forms of overt and covert advertising across different platforms (e.g., websites, social media, and mobile apps) and their interactions with marketing content (e.g., liking or sharing social media newsfeed advertising with peers). Important insights will emerge if researchers carefully consider the role of social environmental factors (e.g., children’s interactions with parents, peers, and media) as mediating or moderating factors that possibly affect the relationship between children’s age and their understanding of and responses to digital marketing.

Gap 2. The Lack of Empirical Evidence Regarding the Impact of Digital Marketing on Children

This chapter has addressed a number of concerns associated with digital marketing targeted at children, including content personalisation and privacy intrusion, unclear distinctions between commercial and non-commercial content, and materialistic attitudes induced by in-app advertising. However, little research has been carried out to investigate the impact of these marketing practices on children. Although many studies address teenagers’ online information disclosure or protection behaviours (e.g., Shin & Kang, 2016; Walrave & Heirman, 2013), not much is known regarding children and teenagers’ responses to personalised and targeted digital marketing content and the implications of those choices for their privacy, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Youn & Shin, 2019; Zarouali, Poels, Pottet, & Walrave, 2018; Zarouali et al., 2017). Likewise, research on young consumers’ responses to covert social media advertising and mobile marketing is currently underdeveloped (De Jans, Van de Sompel, Hudders, & Cauberghe, 2017). Thus, little is known regarding how covert advertising presented across different digital platforms affects children’s buying intentions, whether children’s awareness of the data collection practices of mobile apps influences their use of those apps, and to what extent children’s in-app purchases have adverse effects on their wellbeing and that of their parents.

Future research will generate new breakthroughs by exploring a broader range of digital marketing practices, especially covert, targeted, and personalised ones that may lower young consumers’ cognitive defences and invade their privacy. While a few studies focus on teenagers’ responses to personalised social media advertising (Youn & Shin, 2019; Zarouali et al., 2017, 2018), pre-adolescent children’s responses to and interactions with digital marketing are largely unknown. Given that children under the age of 13 often engage in social media activities and
can be targeted by covert and personalised marketing messages on social media, greater attention needs to be given to this younger target segment.

**Gap 3. Need for Reconceptualisation of Persuasion Knowledge**

In the advertising and marketing literature, persuasion knowledge refers to consumers’ ability to recognise and evaluate advertisers’ persuasive motivations, which is a critical skill for young consumers to obtain and develop in order to cope with persuasive efforts by marketers (Friestad & Wright, 1994). When a consumer recognises the persuasive intentions of a marketer, his/her knowledge of persuasion is activated. This activated persuasive knowledge helps the consumer counter the marketer’s persuasive attempts and critically assess marketing communication messages (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, & Dima, 2018).

Wojdynski (2016) argues that an advertisement that blends itself to the surrounding content, like native advertising on social media, “imposes a high bar to the activation of persuasion knowledge” (p. 1478). This implies that the covert advertising prevalent in digital marketing is less likely to activate children’s persuasion knowledge, leading them to be less critical about, and more susceptible to, promotional messages.

However, it is also possible that extensive social media use and frequent exposure to social media newsfeed advertising may familiarise children with these advertising formats and practices, making them more knowledgeable about covert advertising. Such persuasion knowledge developed through repeated exposure and experience will help children cope with advertising blended with non-commercial social media content, and thus to become more resilient to covert advertising. However, this persuasion knowledge may not be useful when they encounter different forms of digital advertising like retargeted advertising or location-based advertising. They may have to develop different types of persuasion knowledge to deal with these variations.

The current digital marketing environment, crowded with diverse tools and platforms for reaching young consumers, requires children to have multiple sets of persuasion knowledge to cope with diverse and constantly changing marketing strategies. This requires researchers to reconceptualise persuasion knowledge and reconsider how it works in digital contexts. In the context of fast-changing marketing practices especially well-suited to target children, important questions to ask are as follows:

- What constitutes persuasion knowledge in the digital media environment?
- How do young digital consumers acquire and cultivate persuasion knowledge?
- How can one’s persuasion knowledge be measured in digital marketing contexts?

Recently, Boerman et al. (2018) developed scales for measurement of adult consumers’ persuasion knowledge of sponsored content (i.e., promotional messages integrated into television programmes, video games, and blog posts) and demonstrated that persuasion knowledge of sponsored content comprises nine different components. Future research can examine whether Boerman et al.’s scales are applicable to assess young consumers’ persuasion knowledge of covert advertising.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has described children as multifaceted consumers who live in a fast-changing digital environment and are heavily targeted by various digital marketing strategies. Current marketing practices directed to youth raise numerous concerns. However, the existing research literature has significant gaps in understanding how children recognise, process, and are affected by diverse
marketing practices. Identifying the gaps in current knowledge, this chapter offers concrete suggestions for future research. A deeper understanding of children as consumers, and of their responses to the transforming digital and social media marketing environments, will enable media educators and policy-makers to assess the fairness of digital marketing practices and develop effective guidelines to raise more digitally resilient consumers.

References


