

# Advertising to Children and Teens: Current Practices

A Common Sense Media Research Brief

SPRING 2014



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# Introduction

**The average American child age 8 or older spends more than seven hours a day with screen media, watching TV, using the computer, playing video games, and using hand-held devices (Rideout et al., 2010). Even much younger children, age 2-8, spend nearly two hours a day with screen media (Common Sense Media, 2013). And through virtually all these media, children are exposed to advertising.**

The media environment for children and teens has changed dramatically in recent years, and so, too, has the advertising environment — perhaps even more so. In the past, advertising to children and youth consisted primarily of 30-second TV ads; now it includes product placements, immersive websites, advergames, viral marketing, mobile ads, social-media marketing, and precise behavioral and location targeting. More than ever before, advertising and entertainment are inextricably linked. In many cases, the content is the ad.

With all the focus on how children and teens are affected by media, the advertising embedded in all this content is sometimes overlooked. The purpose of this research brief is to provide an inventory of the new techniques and methods being used to market to children and teens, and a review of what we know about the extent of children's exposure to advertising and marketing messages through media. The brief highlights where research is scarce, incomplete, or outdated and offers some thoughts on the need for important new areas of study.



## Inventory: How Children and Teens Are Advertised to Today

**Television advertising.** Children and teens still spend more time watching TV than they do using any other type of media, an average of approximately one hour a day among 2- to 8-year-olds (Common Sense Media, 2013) and more than two-and-a-half hours a day of live TV among those 8 and older (Rideout et al., 2010). TV viewing is gradually shifting from “live” programming (i.e., watching shows as they are aired) to viewing online or on mobile devices (Nielsen, 2011) or to programming that is either ad-free (such as on premium cable) or recorded on a digital video recorder (DVR) and watched later, so the ads can be skipped (Common Sense Media, 2013). In addition, some portion of children’s viewing is on networks that don’t have traditional advertising, such as PBS or the Disney Channel. Nonetheless, live TV viewing continues to dominate young people’s TV viewing (Rideout et al., 2010; Common Sense Media, 2013), and the bulk of their viewing is still on ad-supported platforms.

Children’s exposure to traditional TV ads is the most straightforward type of exposure for researchers to quantify, and yet even data on this relatively simple measure is hard to access in the public arena. Content studies can count the number and type of ads in a representative sample of television shows, but such studies don’t reflect the mix of programming actually watched by children or teens (some commercial-free, some prime-time, some children’s, some cable, some broadcast).

One study that relied on Nielsen data estimated that children age 2-11 saw an average of about 25,600 TV ads per year and that more than 40 percent of their ad exposure was from shows whose audience is not primarily children (meaning less than 20 percent of the audience is children) (Holt et al., 2007). Some studies focus specifically on quantifying children’s exposure to particular categories of television advertising, such as food. For example, a study using Nielsen data determined that children age 2-11 viewed an average of 14 food or beverage ads a day in 2004, 12.3 in 2008, 13.4 in 2010, and 12.8 in 2011 (Rudd Center, 2012). Adolescents (age 12-17) saw slightly more, an average of 13.2 a day in 2004, 13.1 in 2007, and 16.2 in both 2010 and 2011. Studies using Nielsen data also can quantify the number of ads seen in specific product categories. For example, the Rudd Center (2012) determined that, as of 2011, fast-food restaurant, candy, and cereal ads accounted for just under half of all food and beverage ads seen by children and adolescents (Rudd Center, 2012). However, very few academic or public-sector researchers are able to purchase Nielsen data.

## Product placement and embedded advertising.

Many companies are now incorporating their products into the programming that audiences are viewing (TV, movies) or playing (games). Instead of featuring a company's product or brand in a separate, distinct ad, companies pay to have their products and logos appear during the program itself. According to the *New York Times*, this type of brand placement has become a "hot trend" in advertising, "going beyond the realm of traditional advertising and into the world of editorial and entertainment known as content marketing or branded content" (Elliott, 2013a).

*Embedded advertising* is a term the FCC uses to encompass several types of brand placement — for example, product placement (the use of a branded product in a production) and product integration (the incorporation of the product into the dialogue or plot of the program or game) (Cain, 2011). Embedded advertising now occurs across media platforms, from television to movies to video games. In a video game, product placement might involve a character passing an "ad" for a product in a virtual world — perhaps a billboard for a soft drink — or passing a vending machine in a "hallway" of that world.

Although this practice isn't new, it has become more attractive to companies as consumers have been watching more "time-shifted" TV and fast-forwarding through ads, making them harder to reach through traditional advertising.

In 2002, Coca-Cola struck one of the most visible product-placement deals at the time when it paid to have a glass of Coke placed in front of each judge on *American Idol* (Carter, 2002). In the first half of 2007, Coca-Cola appeared 3,054 times on broadcast network programs (Story, 2007). Product integration can go well beyond mere "placement," such as when an entire episode of "The Apprentice" revolved around a competition to design Burger King's new Western Angus Steak Burger (Porter, 2008).

One of only a handful of studies to document children's exposure to product placements on TV focused on food- and beverage-related placements (Speers, Harris, & Schwartz, 2011). Using Nielsen data, this study found that, in 2008, Coca-Cola accounted for 15 percent of all product placements that occurred on TV and 70 percent of all placements viewed by children. Due to the large number of children in the audience for "general audience" programming such as *American Idol* (nearly 2.2 million per episode in 2008) and the fact that Coke doesn't advertise directly on children's shows, children actually viewed nearly 10 times as many Coke "brand appearances" through embedded advertising than through traditional TV commercials (a total of 198 during the year, or three to four times per week) (Harris, 2013).

To date, researchers haven't settled on a methodology for measuring exposure to this form of advertising; they haven't even decided whether it's a matter of simply counting the number of exposures to an image of the brand's logo or product or somehow factoring in the length of the exposure and/or whether dialogue is included or the "story line" of the episode is driven by the product. It is also difficult to know how to compare such exposure to a child or teen's exposure to discrete, longer-form advertising. Preliminary research indicates children have a harder time identifying "embedded" content as advertising and understanding the persuasive intent behind it (Owen et al., 2013). At this point, there simply are no accurate measures of the extent or impact of young people's exposure to product placements and other types of embedded advertising.



**Cross-promotions.** Advertising to children and teens continues to rely heavily on cross-promotional tie-ins with popular cartoon characters, sports stars, and Hollywood celebrities. These can range from free movie-character toys offered with children’s meals to sophisticated social-media campaigns aimed at teenagers and featuring popular musicians or movie stars.

There is currently no publicly available official count of cross-promotions aimed at the youth market nor an agreed-upon methodology within the research community for tracking children’s exposure to such campaigns. News stories illustrate some examples, however. In mid-2013, the mobile-game developer Zynga formed a number of cross-promotional partnerships to market its newest game. Ads for the animated movie *Despicable Me 2* were shown in the new Zynga game, and drawing challenges in the game were built around the movie’s characters. Youth-oriented celebrities such as Carly Rae Jepsen and will.i.am also participated in the new game (Wortham, 2013).

In a Congressionally mandated study of food-industry marketing to children, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) used subpoenas to collect advertising data from companies (FTC, 2012). This study documented more than 120 cross-promotions in 2009 (up from 80 in 2006) “tying food and beverage products to popular movies, TV programs, cartoon characters, toys, websites, video games, theme parks, and other entertainment venues.”

**Online advertising.** Online advertising has fundamentally changed the nature of marketing to children and youth. In the beginning, online ads were nothing more than static “banner ads”: images of a marketing message with a minimal amount of text. Today, online advertising encompasses not only more sophisticated and enticing banner ads but also “advergames,” online videos, branded websites, virtual worlds, and social marketing. According to research published in 2010, 87 percent of the most popular children’s websites include some type of advertising (Cai & Zhao, cited in Kunkel & Castonguay, 2012). Today’s online advertising represents a “fundamentally different” type of exposure from that of TV or print (Moore & Rideout, 2007; Montgomery, 2012). Online advertising is a game changer for several reasons:

- It is often interactive, meaning the child or teen actively engages with the brand (for example, by playing a game that involves the brand’s product or logo or by voting for “favorite” flavors or videos);
- It is also often “immersive,” meaning that the child or adolescent is in a fully branded “environment” for an extended period of time, and the lines between advertising and other content are blurred; and
- Online advertising is fundamentally different because it can be built on data about the child or teenager that allows it to be targeted to them based on their interests, locations, and demographic characteristics.

All of these factors also make it difficult to measure and evaluate the impact of children’s exposure to online advertising. As American University’s Kathryn Montgomery (2012) has noted, “[D]igital entertainment and advertising are now thoroughly intertwined,” and this makes it “difficult to isolate advertising as a separate form of communication” — either by the child or by researchers. It is also difficult to know how to compare the effect of a 30-second TV ad that is passively received by a child to the effect of that child playing a branded game for three minutes or to the effect of his or her interacting with an online ad that has been targeted especially to him or her. With targeting, a young girl who has searched for dolls may see ads for various new doll products, while a teenager who has downloaded a certain type of music or searched for books on particular subjects may see ads that are based on those searches.

In general, research about online advertising to youth has lagged far behind research on television advertising (Kunkel & Castonguay, 2012). A search of an academic database showed 50 citations for scholarly articles on children, advertising, and television between 2001 and 2005, compared to only four citations on children, advertising, and the Internet. Between 2006 and 2010, 56 studies on children and TV advertising were referenced, compared to 16 for the Internet (Kunkel & Castonguay, 2012). Clearly, we need new methodologies for measuring children's exposure to online advertising and research to comparatively assess the impact of these various online-advertising techniques.

It is likely that children's exposure to online advertising is quite high. As of 2010, children age 8 and older are spending an average of an hour and a half each day using a computer for fun at home. This includes activities such as visiting social-networking sites, playing online games, watching videos on sites such as YouTube, or surfing the Internet (Rideout, 2010). It does not include time spent watching TV online (another 24 minutes a day, on average), listening to music on a computer, or doing schoolwork. Computer use starts young: 5- to 8-year-olds average 18 minutes a day using a computer (Common Sense Media, 2013).

Following are some specific types of advertising children and teens are exposed to online:

**Advergaming:** Advergaming are games that are created by a firm for the explicit purpose of promoting one or more of its brands (Moore & Rideout, 2007). According to a 2006 study, 63 percent of children's websites include advergaming (Weber, Story, & Harnack, 2006), while a more recent study found that 80 percent of websites for foods that were promoted on children's TV networks included such games (Culp, Bell, & Cassidy, 2010). Advergaming can be found on gaming sites or on branded product sites (see section on branded websites below). An advergaming usually involves a user playing with branded items (e.g., using Life Savers or Oreo cookies as gaming pieces) or playing in a heavily branded environment (e.g., a virtual arcade that contains company logos or product images). Advergaming often involve the child for a longer period of time than TV ads do, and the experience of playing the game is more immersive and may promote identification with the product (Moore & Rideout, 2007). By their very nature,

advergaming blur the boundaries between entertainment and advertising content, since they're both an advertisement and a game (Moore & Rideout, 2007). The mental state of "flow" that some gamers get into while playing also may contribute to a blurring of the boundaries (Montgomery et al., 2013). Advergaming exist on websites accessible via computers and mobile devices.

Among the research priorities regarding advergaming are studies to:

- Quantify the extent of advergaming opportunities for children and teens online, and the frequency with which young people engage with such content;
- Ascertain children's ability to recognize an advergaming as an ad or to understand the persuasive intent behind the game;
- Clarify the effect of advergaming, given the prolonged engagement children have with brand icons while playing.

**Branded websites:** Many companies have created branded websites that include content designed to attract children or teens. These websites, which are promoted in television ads and on product packaging, may include elements such as games, contests, videos, and downloadable branded products. For example, Pepsi has had several websites and a YouTube channel for Mountain Dew since 2007. One website, MountainDew.com, is openly branded and has a variety of teen-oriented content about snowboarders, rap music, and Mountain Dew-sponsored skateboarding and music tours (the site also promotes the brand's Twitter feed and Facebook site). As of mid-2013, the company is consolidating several of its other sites into a new site (Green-Label.com) that will feature content on fashion, sports, music, and gaming designed to attract young viewers (Elliott, 2013b). The senior brand manager for the soda company calls the new site a "hub for youth culture" and points to its immersive and cross-platform nature, noting that it signals "a transition from a campaign-specific approach to an 'always-on' approach" (Elliott, 2013b).

Branded websites attract younger children, some because they're aimed at children and others because children are among users that may also include teens and young adults (Harris, Weinberg, Javadizadeh, & Sarda, 2013). MyCokeRewards.com received 42,000 unique child visitors (age 2–11) every month in 2010 (Harris et al., 2011). A study of the websites of companies that marketed food to children on television found that 85 percent had websites with content for children (Moore & Rideout, 2007). Another found that the top cereal brands maintained branded websites aimed at children (Cheyne et al., 2013). Among the types of content found on branded websites are:

*Viral marketing:* Viral marketing includes efforts to encourage children to send branded greetings to their friends or to invite their friends to visit the company's website. This might include a suggestion to send a friend a "postcard" (promoting the website) or to "challenge a friend" to play one of the site's games. Once the child visitor shares his or her friend's email address, the company sends the friend a message promoting the site. One study found that two-thirds of child-oriented branded food sites included viral marketing (Moore & Rideout, 2007).

*Online TV ads:* Many branded children's sites feature TV ads and use "polls and rewards to induce kids to watch them, multiple times" (Moore & Rideout, 2007). For example, on one site children could enter a virtual movie theater and watch cereal ads on the large screen, earning points for each time they viewed an ad. On another site, children were asked to view a variety of TV ads for a product and vote for their favorite.

*Downloadable branded items:* Many websites include branded items for a child to download, either onto their computer desktop (such as screensavers) or for printing and using in the "real" world. For example, children can print art activities (e.g., a McDonald's coloring book), book covers, bookmarks, and wall posters. Such items "can be an effective mechanism to provide many additional brand exposures over time" (Moore & Rideout, 2007).

*Premium offers to encourage product purchases:* Nearly a third (31 percent) of sites reviewed in a 2007 study (Moore & Rideout, 2007) included some type of premium offer in exchange for the child purchasing the product. For example, one candy site offered free movie tickets, but the child had to purchase several bags of candy and submit codes from the bags online to enter the sweepstakes. Another food company offered a free branded Super Ball to children if they registered on the website, played an advergame, and invited a friend to the site. Other sites encouraged children to get a code from product packaging to gain access to a "secret" part of the website or "premium" games.

There is scant research either quantifying children's exposure to or examining the effects of branded websites on young people. Among the research priorities regarding branded websites are studies to:

- Document the frequency of ad and brand exposures children experience through the myriad methods being used to reach them on branded websites;
- Explore the impact of viral marketing, including how often children and teens participate in it, whether they are aware of the purpose of companies' efforts to engage them in viral marketing, and what the effect is on both the sender and the recipient;
- Measure the frequency of repeated viewings of video or TV ads by children online, and assess the effect of multiple viewings on the child; and
- Quantify the presence of these and other advertising and marketing elements being used in websites frequented by children.

**Social-media marketing:** Social-media marketing includes a wide variety of online-advertising techniques, including placing ads on social-networking sites such as Twitter or Facebook; establishing profiles for companies on Facebook and other sites for children and teens to interact with; and embedding promotional content into Twitter feeds or Facebook posts. As of 2012, three-quarters of all teenagers reported having a profile on a social-networking site, and 22 percent had a Twitter account. Half of all teens visit their social-networking sites daily and a third do so several times a day (Common Sense Media, 2012).

According to a 2012 report from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) about food marketing to children and teens, “Food marketers had their own Facebook and MySpace pages, links to Twitter accounts, dedicated portions of YouTube, and used other popular social media sites.” Companies encourage young people to “like” them online or sign up for their Twitter feeds, often in exchange for product savings or premiums (FTC, 2012). On Facebook, young people’s “actions” (such as “liking” a company, “listening” to a musical artist, and so on) may appear in posts on their “friends” sites as endorsements, so-called “sponsored story” ads (Goel, 2013).

One of the advantages companies have when they use social-networking sites to market their products is the ability to target their messages based on the interests of the recipient. What a teen posts on her Facebook account can be used to select the ads she will see; similarly Twitter recently announced that it has developed “a new tool that allows marketers to disseminate targeted messages based on the content of users’ tweets” (Shih, 2013). Youth-oriented brands such as Pepsi and Burger King are among “the pioneers of social media marketing,” and PepsiCo has “restructured its overall marketing approach to focus on social media” (Montgomery, 2013). Coca-Cola has 21 million fans on Facebook and is developing its new marketing campaigns using social media (Montgomery, 2013). Companies create a plethora of both branded and unbranded content to drive users to their social-media sites. For example, Pepsi’s “Live for Now” campaign included “exclusive” content on the company’s Facebook and Twitter sites, such as live-streamed concerts, bringing it 250,000 new fans in one month (MediaPost, 2013).

Social-media marketing may also feature user-created content, such as videos created by young people and then spread virally through companies’ social-media campaigns. In a campaign to promote the stuffed-animal toy Furby to tween girls, Hasbro invited young people to create YouTube videos featuring the furry creatures; those videos were then spread virally through social-media posts by top tween celebrities such as Selena Gomez and Carly Rae Jepsen. This campaign generated 10 million social-media impressions (MediaPost, 2013). A Twitter campaign sponsored by Gatorade during the Olympics created a special branded “microsite” on which teen athletes spoke about their lives and motivations and invited teen viewers to tweet about their own inspirations using a special hashtag. The best of those tweets were then reposted and retweeted, generating a reported 11 million social-media impressions (Media Post, 2013).

To date, research about social-media marketing and teens has been limited. For example, it is not known:

- How often teens interact with corporate social-networking sites by “liking” products and the extent of their subsequent interactions with the company or product as a result of taking that action;
- The effect of the contact teens then receive from companies they have engaged with online; or
- The influence of “sponsored story”-style testimonial ads viewed by teens on their social-networking sites.

**Banner ads:** Banner ads are still used to market to children and teens. Indeed, a study by Yale University’s Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity calculated that more than three billion “display advertisements” for food and beverages were viewed on children’s websites between July 2009 and June 2010 (Ustjanauskas et al., 2013).

**Mobile advertising.** The advent of mobile advertising to children and teens is another game changer. Now young people can be reached with advertising messages throughout the day, not only when they're sitting in front of a television set or a computer. As with online advertising, the content is interactive. Mobile advertising can be targeted to young people more narrowly than other online advertising, since it can track their locations in relation to specific retail outlets or fast-food venues (Montgomery, 2013). As of 2012, 41 percent of all 12- to 17-year-olds had a smartphone, and two out of three had some type of mobile device that could connect to the Internet, such as a tablet or an iPod Touch (Common Sense Media, 2012).

Mobile advertising can come in the form of small banner ads, branded apps, and "in-app" advertising. Most mobile Internet use now is conducted primarily through mobile applications, or "apps" (Nielsen, 2011). When a user downloads an app, the company behind the app often gains access to significant amounts of information about him or her, which can then be used to target advertising. Apps may access more than personal information, too; they can access a teen's contact list and photos. According to Nielsen (2011), more than half of teens say they "always" or "sometimes" look at mobile ads.

A *branded app* is similar to a branded website — a specific company (e.g., Starbucks or Coca-Cola) creates an application that offers ways for children and teens to interact with the company or its products, through games or by responding to special offers such as coupons. Marketers believe that this exposure to branded content on a mobile device is "a great way to create significant lifts in brand affinity, brand recall and future purchase intent" (Ting, 2008). Companies often offer rewards to users who download a branded app (Tapjoy, 2012).

Examples of branded apps include games from sports companies (Nike Golf 360), movies (*Men In Black 3*), soda companies (Coke's *Crabs and Penguins* game), and deodorant companies aimed at young men (Unilever). A representative from the company that helped Coke design one of that company's mobile games noted, "A game can reinforce the brand on several levels: a game app can create an emotional connection with the target audience, solidify the game player's brand loyalty, reinforce the brand's credibility, and potentially motivate the young person to buy more product" (Johnson, 2012).

"*In-app*" advertisements can come in the form of banner and pop-up ads that occur between levels in a game, or they can appear as product placement, with "characters" in an app wearing branded content or teen users being encouraged to create outfits for their mobile avatars using branded clothing (Wild Tangent, nd). Apps also ask users to "refer a friend" in exchange for rewards such as access to "premium" games or extra in-app currency (Wild Tangent, nd). A user can be required to "watch" an in-app ad to proceed with the game they were playing, or they can earn virtual currency by watching ads (often video advertisements similar to TV ads).

*Location-based mobile marketing.* Mobile marketing also can involve content targeting children or teens based on their being inside of or in the vicinity of a retail location. This can include texting a coupon to a teen who checks in at a fast-food location or scans a barcode inside a store (Montgomery, 2013). A recent Chuck E. Cheese campaign encouraged children to take a picture of themselves inside one of the brand's outlets and then superimpose the company's mouse into the shot (the picture can then be shared via social media) (MediaPost, 2013). The mobile game My Town gives points for checking in at stores, including Subway, McDonald's, and Pizza Hut, while McDonald's also has used a Foursquare check-in campaign (Montgomery, 2013).

*Mobile advergames.* Advergames can exist on computers or on mobile devices, where they are generally more casual in nature. For example, Malibu Rum created a mobile game in which the player "bowls" with bottles of rum, and Bud Light sponsors mobile air-hockey games (Chester et al., 2010). Although the alcohol industry voluntarily limits marketing to venues where no more than 30 percent of the audience is underage, many young people can be attracted to such content (Kunkel & Castonguay, 2012). Coca-Cola created a teen-directed mobile game that would pop up inside of whatever mobile activity the teen was engaged in, so that "[w]ithout leaving their native mobile experience, teens vied to complete a series of time-based challenges to win 'instant rewards.'" (Media Post, 2013).

Research on children's and teens' exposure to mobile advertising is woefully behind the curve. For example, we lack even basic data about teenagers' use of mobile apps, such as how many teens or tweens have downloaded apps, how many apps they have downloaded, how much time they spend using apps, which types of apps they have, or the level of their exposure to app-based advertising or marketing.

## Integrated marketing campaigns.

Although the previous sections of this paper are organized primarily by media platform, one of the most important features of advertising to children and teens today is that it is cross-platform. Integrated marketing campaigns aim messages at youth from multiple directions at the same time. A single campaign can encompass product packaging, Hollywood cross-promotions, TV advertising, product placement, and mobile social-media messages. The online components alone can be extensive. For example, Coca-Cola launched an all-digital integrated campaign in 2013 called “The AHH Effect” (Lukovitz, 2013). It includes a large variety of what the company calls “snackable” digital content, such as quick videos (cats playing with Coke boxes) and casual games (“Guide the Bubble”). It also includes cross-promotions with youth-oriented celebrities including gamers and musicians, as well as a social-media contest to encourage teens to create their own Coke-related digital content, with the winning entries given their own URL.

# Conclusion

After decades of relative stability in the main pathways used to deliver advertising to children and teens, recent years have seen an explosion in new avenues for young people to be exposed to advertising through media. The qualities inherent in new-media platforms are fundamentally different from those of other media, including elements such as interactivity, immersion, viral messaging, user-generated content, and location-based targeting. Yet public-sector research has been unable to develop the proper metrics for measuring children's and teens' exposure to such advertising, their ability to distinguish and understand the intent of these forms of marketing, and the impact it may have on them (Kunkel & Castonguay, 2012). Understanding how all these new types of advertising work together is another challenge for researchers (Montgomery, 2013). Adolescents have been especially neglected in such research, since public policies so often focus on children under age 12 (Montgomery, 2013).

## Recommendations

### **1. The field needs an ongoing research effort to monitor advertising and marketing practices aimed at children and youth.**

An ongoing inventory of advertising methods will help the public health community and other child advocates stay current on the latest techniques being used to market to children and teens. The advent of online and mobile media has created a totally new world of advertising to children and teens, and academic research hasn't come close to keeping pace with these changes. A comprehensive monitoring project would help inform "effects" research; ground policy debates in current practices; and bolster the efforts of pro-social marketers trying to reach young people with critical messages.

### **2. Researchers need to develop new methods to quantify young people's exposure to advertising.**

The old methodology of simply counting the number of 30-second TV ads in children's shows is almost quaintly simplistic given the complexity of today's advertising environment.

Even basic research on the amount of advertising children and teenagers are exposed to is woefully out of date and incomplete. In fact, given the dramatic changes in advertising methods and platforms, there isn't even a reliable methodology for measuring young people's exposure to advertising and marketing messages. The blurring of the lines between advertising and "content" that is inherent in so many of the new techniques of marketing to children makes it difficult for researchers to distinguish the marketing messages and quantify children's exposure to them. Campaigns cross so many platforms — from product placement to online games and Facebook apps — that we need new methods for counting marketing messages and for comparatively assessing children's overall exposure to them (e.g., how much "weight" should be given to the frequent appearances of Starbucks drinks on *The Voice* or Coke on *American Idol*?).

### **3. Research is needed to help assess at what age (if ever) children can discern the marketing messages in new media, as well as how well they are able to understand and defend against the persuasive intent of these messages.**

At this point we lack even the most rudimentary research needed for policymakers to ascertain whether certain types of practices of marketing to children are fair, such as enlisting them as "viral" marketers, enticing them to purchase products through rewards and incentives, exposing them to product placement in popular TV shows, or encouraging them to make their own ads and enter them in a contest. How does a child evaluate an invite from a friend asking him or her to visit a food company's website and play a branded advergame there? How does he or she process the brand cues in a mobile game? How does a teen assess a tweet from a celebrity inviting him or her to view a new YouTube video sponsored by a soda company? Are there ways to label sponsored content that would have a meaningful impact on young people's ability to discern advertising messages from entertainment content, as ad "bumpers" do on TV?

#### **4. Researchers need to study the impact of advertising on young people's product purchases and consumption.**

The impact of advertising on children's ultimate purchases or consumption is often "assumed" because of parents' direct experiences and because common sense dictates that advertisers would never spend the sums they do on advertising if they didn't have good reason to believe it boosted product sales and consumption. The FTC's Congressionally mandated review of food and beverage advertising to children indicates there is substantial *proprietary* research conducted by these industries to guide their ad investments toward the most effective techniques (FTC, 2012). But various industries and advertising trade associations often push back against proposed regulatory policies by indicating that there is no evidence that their advertising actually works, and policymakers often support the call for additional public-sector research.

#### **5. Research needs to explore the impact of targeted advertising on youth.**

In addition to the new platforms and forms of advertising, the fact that ads are now directed at specific individuals based on their interests, actions, and locations also is a game changer when it comes to understanding the impact of advertising on youth. What does it mean when a tween or teen is the subject of advertising and marketing messages that are targeted to her based on her age, gender, the fast-food outlets and stores she frequents, whom she follows on Twitter, the games she likes to play, the books or music she has downloaded, the types of videos she likes to watch, and the topics she has searched online? Targeted advertising is relatively new, and we do not yet have the research to fully understand its effect.

In sum, there has been a revolution in the world of advertising and marketing to children and teens, and the research we need to fully understand its effects has simply not kept up. There are many reasons to be concerned about advertising's impact on young people: it often promotes products with health implications, such as fast food, soda, and candy; there are public-policy implications on issues such as privacy and fairness; some parents and advocates are concerned about the over-commercialization of childhood; children can be exposed to advertising for adult-oriented products such as alcohol, tobacco, and violent media; and children's advocates and public health experts need to stay current on the most effective techniques for reaching young people with messages that will benefit their healthy development. None of these issues can be fully illuminated unless the research community is funded to undertake the essential research projects outlined here.



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# Advertising to Children and Teens: Current Practices

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A Common Sense Media Research Brief

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## Common Sense Media's *Program for the Study of Children and Media*

The mission of Common Sense Media's *Program for the Study of Children and Media* is to provide parents, educators, health organizations, and policymakers with reliable, independent data on children's use of media and technology and the impact it has on their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development. For more information about the program and to read reports on these studies, visit [www.commonsense.org/research](http://www.commonsense.org/research).

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