Supplementary written evidence submitted by Professor Sonia Livingstone and Dr Miriam Rahali

Written evidence on influencer culture and children, submitted by Professor Sonia Livingstone and Dr Miriam Rahali, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, 12-11-21

Why is advertising harmful to children, and why are influencers particularly harmful to a young audience?

I. Advertising Literacy

Unless children are able to differentiate between advertising and other forms of entertainment, and grasp the persuasive intent of advertising, then they are at risk of deception. This is especially true for children under 12, whose advertising literacy – all knowledge and skills related to advertising – has not yet fully developed. Cognitive abilities, emotion regulation and moral development are still immature for children under 12. These abilities are critical in helping them to:

- understand the persuasive intent of advertising and strategies used to persuade them
- control the emotions that advertisements may arouse
- evaluate the fairness and appropriateness of advertising

Children from the age of 5 start to distinguish advertising from noncommercial media content. By 8, most children have acquired a general understanding of advertising's selling intent which is knowledge that advertising is created in order to sell products.

Regulators, industry, influencers and educators should help children better make this distinction. Transparency is essential, and all ads should be clearly demarcated.

Caveat: This remains problematic due to the fact that there is a lack of consistency across the board (both nationally and internationally) when it comes to determining and subsequently labelling 'ads.' In the UK, disclosures can be made verbally, but can also be included in the description – and young children may yet be able to read.

II. Embedded Advertising/ Influencer Culture

Young children still struggle with significantly integrated and highly immersive marketing in online environments. Online platforms provide opportunities for editorial and marketing content to converge in ways and to degrees that are often not possible in traditional media. Importantly, such communications may lack more traditional signifiers of commercial intent, such as clear separation from the surrounding editorial content, which younger children rely on to trigger their critical understanding.

It is only between the ages of 9-11 that children start to understand advertising's persuasive intent – which is knowledge that advertising is made to generate *favourable* views toward products. Crucially for embedded content, such as content promoted by **influencers**, knowledge of persuasive intent develops at a slower pace than knowledge of selling intent. School-aged children and teenagers may be able to recognize advertising but often are not able to resist it when it is embedded within trusted social networks, encouraged by celebrity influencers, or delivered next to personalized content.

For 8- and 9-year-olds, understanding the persuasive intent of advertising appeared to strengthen their desire for the advertised product. Children with higher levels of cognitive advertising defences have a better developed advertising-related associative memory network. This implies that the more children know about advertising, the easier it is for them to learn more about it. Based on the assumption that children younger than 10 do not use their cognitive defences to think critically or generate counterarguments against advertising, it is argued that a higher level of cognitive advertising literacy facilitates the processing of the persuasive content of a commercial in this age group, but does not result in a critical evaluation, in turn producing stronger advertising effects, such as the desire for advertised products.

Previous research has investigated children's (ages 9-11) advertising literacy by exploring their knowledge and judgements (and reasoning strategies) of the new advertising formats. In particular, insight is provided into children's critical reflection on the tactics of brand integration (or embedded advertising). Findings show that:

- Despite their basic understanding of the selling intent of advertising in general, kids did not actively look out for advertising that is embedded in entertaining and/or interactive media content
- The children seemed easily overwhelmed by the fun and immersive character of the new advertising formats which usually resulted in a positive evaluation of these formats and indifference towards the used tactics

Furthermore, the parasocial relationship that can develop between the kidfluencer and the child viewer is concerning and was not brought up during the sessions. Parasocial interaction is the thought, emotion and action that a child experiences during media exposure to a kidfluencer. Because of repeated exposure, these interactions can develop into a parasocial relationship, which is a one-sided symbolic relationship between the viewer and the kidfluencer.

This intimacy is especially concerning when combined with commodification. The embedded nature of influencer marketing can be considered problematic because it lowers children's ability and motivation to recognize it as 'advertising'. Influencers' sponsored posts and videos appear between non-sponsored content in their feeds, which results in the simultaneous exposure of editorial and commercial messages. In other words, the integrated nature of these advertising formats creates a challenge for children to recognize them as advertising, distinguish the commercial content from media content, and understand the commercial intent of and tactics used within advertising. This becomes important if children feel as if they know an influencer on a personal level and are trusting of their content. Exposure to these cues could give children the impression that these items are important to an influencer which could impact their own relationship with food and beverages, toys and games, etc.

Platforms should clearly demarcate advertising from influencers from other kinds of content. Furthermore, the volume of influencer advertising that children are exposed to should be minimized, in order to mitigate the risk of harms. This would go a long way in reducing the number of messages that may be problematic (such as the emphasis on aesthetics, body-image and materialism), *without* overtly infringing on the influencers' right to freedom of expression and information.

Because children are not able to fully understand commercial or persuasive intent, then the platform needs to be regulated. Currently the content landscape is dictated by profit and brand or platform decisions, and it is not in the interests of children. The personalised-advertising, algorithm-driven, maximised-engagement business model has played a large role in creating a *commercial* online environment. As such, transparency behind algorithms is recommended.

Caveat: Without explanation, enforcing a ban – or a limitation on ads/sponsored content –is problematic, and doesn't fully do the job that society needs it to do. It acts as a shield without providing the tools to be able to deconstruct or be critical of the messages. This is likely to be beneficial in the short-term; but in the long run, stakeholders should be focusing on building children's critical digital literacy skills.

Conclusion

The focus of regulation should be where the risk of being online turns to harm. Platforms that lead children (who are unable to gauge intent) towards certain commercial or profitable messages are harms that the Bill or other mechanisms can regulate against.

The highly commercial aspect of the 'influencing' issue might provide an excellent opportunity to be reminded about the state and value of publicly funded services for children. If young audiences are increasingly viewing 'influencer' content, then is it time to ask whether the current provision is delivering what young people both want and need.

Concerned stakeholders should continue to further develop medial literacy skills. The UK might become the 'safest' place to be online – but how are children equipped to navigate an alternate terrain once they step outside the bubble of UK protection?

Annex: Additional notes and references regarding *Children as Audiences for Influencers*

1. Context on how children consume media online including influencer content

- In 2020, nearly all children aged 5-15 went online. Laptops, tablets and mobiles were the most used devices for going online, used by seven in ten of these children.
- Children were twice as likely to watch TV programmes on video-on-demand (VoD) than live TV. Almost all children (96%) watched any type of VoD compared to just over half (56%) watching live TV.
- Children's use of video-sharing platforms (VSPs) was nearly universal, with a majority using VSPs more during the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic than before.
- Just over half of 5-15s used social media sites or apps, rising to 87% of 12-15s. The range of sites and apps used remains diverse; around a third of 5-15s used Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook.
- Just under half of children aged 8-15 who used search engines could correctly identify adverts on Google searches, and about half realised that some sites within a search engine's results could be trusted and some couldn't.
- Two-thirds of 12-15s recognised that vloggers and influencers might be sponsored to say good things about products or brands. Children in our Children's Media Lives study found this helpful as it showed them products and services that were in line with their interests.[1]

2. Children's relationships with influencers (parasocial, critical, etc)

Research shows that this relationship strongly varies by **age** (and **gender**).

- Up to half of children surveyed in aforementioned Ofcom study said they watched vloggers or YouTube influencers; this was more likely among 8-11s (47%) and 12-15s (49%) than among younger children aged 5-7 (34%). According to The Insights Family the choice of vlogger varied by gender.
- Boys and girls perceive different qualities in their favourite male and female characters. For instance, preschool girls were found to identify more with characters who were sassy, whereas boys identified based on the strength of the character.[2]
- Both tween boys and girls rated favourite female characters as more prosocial in their behaviour than they did favourite male characters. In addition, girls rated favourite female characters as more physically attractive and more intelligent than they did favourite male characters.[3]
- In 'Tweens' Wishful Identification and Parasocial Relationships With YouTubers', Tolbert & Drogos (2019)[4] sought to understand how tweens (ages 9–12) watch YouTube and determine the nature of their parasocial relationships and wishful identification with their favourite YouTube personalities. They found that tweens identified gender-congruent YouTubers as their favourite. Moreover, tweens perceived male and female YouTubers to have different attributes. For instance, male YouTubers were rated as more violent than female YouTubers, and female YouTubers were rated as more attractive and popular than male YouTubers. Gender also played a role in attachment patterns. Tween boys' wishful identification was predicted by YouTubers who were violent and funny and their parasocial relationships were predicted by YouTubers who were funny, successful, and attractive. Meanwhile, tween girls' wishful identification was predicted by YouTubers' who were funny, and their parasocial relationships were predicted by YouTubers' who were funny and popular.

- The **parasocial relationship** that can develop between the kidfluencer and the child viewer is concerning. Parasocial interaction is the thought, emotion and action that a child experiences during media exposure to a kidfluencer. Because of repeated exposure, these interactions can develop into a parasocial relationship, which is a one-sided symbolic relationship between the viewer and the kidfluencer.
- Past research has examined children's attachment to media characters, but rare is the study that looks at how children attach to kidfluencers.[5] However, there is reason to speculate that the differences between media characters and YouTubers is significant. Traditional characters (such as cartoons, superheroes, etc) are not 'real', whereas kidfluencers do exist in the real world, and kids can interact with them (like/comment on posts) on social media. However, the perceived intimacy can make it difficult for children to realize that the person on-screen is not their 'friend', and the video is not a playdate.[6]
- This intimacy is especially concerning when combined with commodification. The embedded nature of influencer marketing can be considered problematic because it lowers children's ability and motivation to recognize it as 'advertising'. Influencers' sponsored posts and videos appear between non-sponsored content in their feeds, which results in the simultaneous exposure of editorial and commercial messages. In other words, the integrated nature of these advertising formats creates a challenge for children to recognize them as advertising, distinguish the commercial content from media content, and understand the commercial intent of and tactics used within advertising".[7] This becomes important if children feel as if they know an influencer on a personal level, and are trusting of their content. Exposure to these cues could give children the impression that these items are important to an influencer which could impact their own relationship with food and beverages, toys and games, etc.

Critical thinking (applied here more broadly to 'advertising' than influencer)

- Children are uniquely vulnerable to the persuasive effects of influencer advertising because of immature critical thinking skills and impulse inhibition. School-aged children and teenagers may be able to recognize advertising but often are not able to resist it when it is embedded within trusted social networks, encouraged by celebrity influencers, or delivered next to personalized content[8]
- Hudders et al (2016)[9] found that for 8- and 9-year-olds, understanding the persuasive intent of advertising appeared to strengthen their desire for the advertised product. Children with higher levels of cognitive advertising defenses have a better developed advertising-related associative memory network. This implies that the more children know about advertising, the easier it is for them to learn more about it. Based on the assumption that children younger than 10 do not use their cognitive defenses to think critically or generate counterarguments against advertising, it is argued that a higher level of cognitive advertising literacy facilitates the processing of the persuasive content of a commercial in this age group but does not result in a critical evaluation, in turn producing stronger advertising effects, such as the desire for advertised products.
- De Pauw et al. (2018)[10] investigated children's (ages 9-11) advertising literacy by exploring their knowledge and judgements (and reasoning strategies) of the new advertising formats. In particular, insight is provided into children's critical reflection on the tactics of brand integration (or embedded advertising). They found:
    - Despite their basic understanding of the selling intent of advertising in general, kids did not actively look out for advertising that is embedded in entertaining and/or interactive media content

- o However, once they were made aware of these tactics and how they function, virtually all of the children showed that they were able to recognize and understand these tactics and their complex goals
- o The children seemed easily overwhelmed by the fun and immersive character of the new advertising formats which usually resulted in a positive evaluation of these formats and indifference towards the used tactics

3. Risks and opportunities of engaging with influencer content

i. Case Study: Junk Food

- Evidence suggests that exposure to advertising is associated with unhealthy behaviors, such as intake of high-calorie, low-nutrient food and beverages[11]
- Popular social media influencer promotion of food affects children's food intake. Influencer marketing of unhealthy foods increased children's immediate food intake, whereas the equivalent marketing of healthy foods had no effect.[12]
- Previously observed associations between more traditional forms of food marketing and children's dietary behaviors have led to regulations and restrictions of food marketing in most Western countries. Findings – which examined the impact of social media influencer vlogs on children's unhealthy dietary behaviors – indicate a similar need for food marketing by social media influencers.
- (CF: "The Social Code: YouTube" in the Netherlands, which involves a self-regulatory code for social media influencers under supervision of the Dutch Media Authority)

UK Case Study: Coates et al. (2019) Food and beverage cues featured in YouTube videos of social media influencers popular with children: An exploratory study.

A UK study on food and beverage cues featured in YouTube videos of social media influencers popular with children aimed to explore the extent and nature of food and beverage cues featured in YouTube videos of influencers popular with children. (The data provide the first empirical assessment of the extent and nature of food and beverage cue presentation in YouTube videos by influencers popular with children).

Analysis was done on all videos uploaded by two influencers (one female, one male) over a year (2017). The female influencer had approximately **16.8 million** subscribers, and the male influencer **9.2 million**. Both influencers were popular with children between the age of 5–15 years in the UK.

Based on previous content analyses of broadcast marketing, cues were categorized by product type and classified as "healthy" or "less healthy" according to the UK Nutrient Profiling Model. Cues were also coded for branding status, and other factors related to their display (e.g., description). The sample comprised 380 YouTube videos (119.5 h).

The findings show that only 27 videos (7.4%) did not feature any food or beverage cues. Cakes (9.4%) and fast foods (8.9%) were the most frequently featured product types, less frequent were healthier products such as fruits (6.5%) and vegetables (5.8%). Overall, cues were more frequently classified as less healthy (49.4%) than healthy (34.5%) and were presented in different contexts according to nutritional profile. Less healthy foods (compared with healthy foods) were more often

branded, presented in the context of eating out, described positively, not consumed, and featured as part of an explicit marketing campaign.

Implications: In the UK, each week 93% of 8–11 year old's, and 99% of 12–15 year olds, spend 13.5 and 20.5 hours, respectively online, and roughly half of these children (44%/52%) report watching YouTube video bloggers.[13] **If the children in the UK who watch YouTube video bloggers spent an hour each day watching this content, it is estimated from this study's findings that they would be exposed to 104 "less healthy" food cues per week (14.8 cues per hour × 7), which equates to 5387 per year.**

- Other research has been done to examine kidfluencers and unhealthy food product placement with an aim to identifying the frequency with which kidfluencers promote branded and unbranded food and drinks during their YouTube videos.[14]

- One study of the most-watched kid influencers (ages 3 – 14 years) on YouTube found that kidfluencers generate millions of impressions for unhealthy food and drink brands through product placement.[15] This is noteworthy because young people's exposure to HFSS cues in social media, including via influencers' content, increases attitudes toward, and immediate intake of, these products. Exposure to HFSS food and beverage cues featured in influencers' social media content have been shown to affect children's immediate brand choice and consumption, with seemingly authentic content being associated with more positive attitudes and taste evaluations during later consumption[16]. This is concerning not only due to the volume of exposure (as evidenced in the aforementioned UK study), but also because of the techniques that blur the lines between advertising and entertaining content.

- While there is robust evidence[17] that links children's exposure to marketing of food and beverages high in fat, sugar and salt with increasing levels of obesity, it should be noted with caution, as correlation is not causation. Advertising is only one but factor influencing children. Health specifically has been shown to be correlated with factors such as socioeconomic status and lifestyle.

Quick 'lifestyle' note: Kidfluencers comprise a relatively new form of advertising to which kids and tweens are exposed. Results of a survey of 300 adolescents (U.S.) revealed that tweens' exposure to kidfluencers is associated with their purchase of kidfluencer-related products through a desire to emulate kidfluencers, and that materialism moderates this relationship. Findings suggest that kidfluencers may propagate a lifestyle to which tweens aspire that may manifest itself in changes to consumer behavior.[18] On the other hand, Ito et al. (2013)[19] argued that the viewing of videos that promote a materialist lifestyle (such as toy unboxing videos) is an 'interest driven' use of the internet.

4.   Moral panic or…? What are the interesting benefits of positive content?

One of the upsides to digital marketing is that YouTubers, for example, are among the many sources of health information young people encounter in the digital age, and they are increasingly recognized by popular media and public health organizations as a potentially influential source of health information. United Kingdom health campaigns are beginning to make use of YouTubers in health improvement, and research has shown that YouTubers can help address certain health issues, such as obesity.[20]

Furthermore, tech companies can devise tools that can effectively quantify the extent and nature of digital marketing, including techniques such as product placement in user-generated social media content. This will facilitate a better understanding of children's likely exposure, and the persuasive ability of that exposure, which is critical for the development of effective public health policy in this area.

Children report enjoying being part of a "follower" community on YouTube and view influencers as both role models and friends who provide support and advice.[21]Therefore, children who are subscribed to influencers that regularly feature, for example, healthy food and beverages in their YouTube videos – and who have watched these videos for a long period of time – may well be affected by this content. Given the variety of content now available to children through video sharing platforms, policymakers and researchers may want to explore the impact on children of content promoting other health-related (e.g., physical activity) or pro-social (e.g., cooperation) behaviours.

5. Advertising?

- Research in the US found that almost half of videos (45%) viewed by children 8 and under featured or promoted products for children to buy. Of these videos, 22% were considered high in consumerism because they centred around toys, involved YouTubers promoting their own merchandise, or prominently featured branded products.
- 95% of videos aimed at children ages eight and younger on YouTube contain ads. Over one-third of videos in the early childhood category contained three or more ads, while 59% contained one to two ads. Ad design in these videos was often problematic, such as banner ads that blocked educational content, sidebar ads that could be confused for recommended videos.[22]
- Approximately 80% of 5–15-year-olds in the United Kingdom report regularly viewing videos on YouTube[23], where they are exposed to advertising before they watch a video, and increasingly, advertisements are embedded *within* the videos as well. The subtle brand integrations in entertaining media content makes them less intrusive, and thus harder to recognize.
- When children aged 12-15 were asked why vloggers or influencers might say good things about products or brands, two-thirds correctly recognised that they might be being paid by the company or brand to promote the product or service (65%). A third thought that they were saying nice things about the product or service because they either wanted to share the information with their followers, or they thought the product or service was cool or good to use. The participants in our Children's Media Lives study understood that influencers were paid to promote content. Rather than annoying them, some reported finding this helpful as it showed them things that were in line with their interests.

6. Media literacy – if we tell children content is commercial, or mark influencer content from other content, is that sufficient? Will it work?

In "Disclosing Influencer Marketing on YouTube to Children" (2020)[24] the effect of disclosures on the activation of children's advertising literacy in the context of influencer marketing in online videos is explored. The researchers found:

- The disclosure is an effective means to inform children about the persuasive nature of a sponsored influencer video. More precisely, when children correctly remember it, the disclosure

significantly enhanced children's recognition of advertising, and their understanding of the selling and persuasive intent of the influencer video. Thus, it seems that the disclosure (if noticed and remembered) can trigger children's knowledge about advertising, by explicitly alerting them to payment by the brand for advertising in the video.

- Various elements of advertising literacy play different roles in the persuasion process. The disclosure activates a cognitive process which leads to higher brand recall both directly and indirectly via recognition of advertising, however, the disclosure also leads to a more affective process in which the understanding that the content is created to sell products leads to lower advertised product desire.
- The para-social relation between a child and an influencer is an important boundary condition for the effects of disclosures on brand attitudes.
- Disclosures do not affect children's attitude toward the video through advertising literacy. Even if a disclosure enhances children's recognition of advertising in the video and their understanding that the video is created to sell products or to persuade, this does not have any consequences for their evaluation of the video itself.

7.   What should be done? And who is responsible?

One might think the responsibility is on the parents, since they are the primary socializing agent of children, and also have (most) control over the internet access/purchases/consumption habits of their children. However, parents with more knowledge and resources will pass that to their children, but the children who don't have such support systems in place are disadvantaged.

Parents play a large role in helping their children be critical of media messages, identify advertising approaches, and resist their influence, so it is also crucial that some of the aforementioned (platform and advertising) measures are in place in children's digital media environments to protect their needs.

There is also a case for focusing on the avoidance of advertising through restriction and regulation, as well as by developing, implementing and evaluating educational interventions and awareness campaigns that acknowledge children's abilities for critical reflection on kidfluencing and its tactics.

Parents should be aware of and monitor children's kidfluencer exposure. Educators should provide media literacy training that incorporates content related to social media influencers. As new media platforms are created/monetized, policymakers should adapt policies related to marketing to children.

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