POLICY BRIEF

Institute for Policy Research

UNIVERSITY OF BATH

Advergames: It's not child's play

About this research

Following the Bailey Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood (2011), David Cameron asked the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) to consider whether more should be done to spell out the commercial intent of 'advergames' to young people and their parents. Advergames are electronic games that are used to advertise a product, a brand or an organisation. They are accessible on social media sites, companies' own websites and as downloadable content or apps on mobile devices. This Policy Brief, by Dr Haiming Hang (University of Bath, School of Management) and Professor Agnes Nairn (EM-Lyon Business School), reviews the latest research evidence on what we do and don't know about the use of advergames and their effects on children, and makes recommendations for industry and regulators. It draws on a more detailed report by the same authors, commissioned by the Family and Parenting Institute (2012).

What we know about the use of advergames and their effect on children:

The findings show that advergames are widely used to promote high salt, sugar and fat (HSSF) food and drink products. Advertisements for these products are banned around children's TV programmes, so companies that market them via advergames exploit a regulatory loophole. Furthermore, children as old as 15 do not recognise advergames as adverts, and are influenced by them without their conscious awareness. This raises fundamental ethical questions about the use of this technique. Finally, voluntary pledges for the better regulation of HSSF advergames have been proven ineffective. This raises questions for the self-regulation of children's new media advertising.

Prolific use of advergames to promote high salt, sugar and fat (HSSF) products

In recent years, advergames for food and drink products have received a great deal of scrutiny. A common finding of previous studies is that advergames are used to promote low-nutrient food. For example, the Kaiser Family Foundation study (Moore, 2006) found that 90% of the food featured in the advergames they identified, through a systematic analysis of 77 food marketing websites, contained high levels of fat, salt and/or sugar. Another American systematic analysis of advergames, for 142 food products targeted at children, found that 83% were of poor nutritional quality (Lee et al, 2009).

Advergames for products high in salt, sugar and fat are of particular concern because there are serious health implications associated with children being influenced to make less healthy dietary choices. Two recent studies, one in the USA (Harris et al, 2012) and one in Portugal (Dias & Agante, 2011), show that playing food-related advergames does influence children's food choices.

The proven power of advergames to change children's eating behaviour is not reflected in the current regulation of HSSF food and drink advertising. In 2007, Ofcom ruled that HSSF food and drink products should not be advertised in and around TV programmes of particular appeal to under-16s. However, as these products are simply advertised online using advergames instead, the industry is exploiting a loophole in the regulatory system. As digital technology allows media to converge, marketing campaigns will be increasingly executed across a range of digital platforms making technique-specific regulations less and less effective. The regulatory framework is not set up to deal with multi-platform campaigns. This requires urgent attention as advertising moves onto mobile devices and advergames are offered as apps.

Key findings

- Advergames are widely used to market high salt, sugar and fat (HSSF) products.
    - The advertising of HSSF products in and around children's TV programmes is banned, so by advertising these products via advergames these companies are exploiting a regulatory loophole.
    - There are serious health concerns associated with children's food choices being influenced subconsciously.
- Children as old as 15 do not recognise that advergames are adverts.
- Advergames persuade on a subconscious, emotional level.
    - Advergames can change children's behaviour without their conscious awareness.
    - This raises fundamental ethical questions about the use of this technique.
- Voluntary pledges for better regulation of HSSF product advergames have been proven ineffective. This raises questions for the self-regulation of children's new media advertising.

Children as old as 15 do not recognise that advergames are advertising

In light of the prolific use of advergames to promote unhealthy products and their effects on childrens' choices, it is critical to question whether and to what extent children are able to recognise advergames as advertising. If children are unable to identify advergames' commercial nature then these fall foul of the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) Code Section 2.1, which clearly states that "adverts must be obviously identifiable as such".

Research in general suggests children's understanding of advergames is undeveloped. For example, a study in the USA (An & Stern, 2011) tested children's recognition of the persuasive intent of an advergame for Honey Comb cereal - called "Be a Popstar"- on Kraft's Postopia website: www.postopia.com. Of the 112 children age 8-10 who took part in the study, only one spontaneously identified that the purpose of the game was to sell the cereal. Another study, done in Australia (Mallinckrodt & Mizerski, 2007), tested the effects of a Kellogg's Fruit Loops advergame on children age 5-8. Even after being given a number of prompts, only 25% of children understood that the advergames had been put on the internet by Kellogg's (ranging from 12% of 5 year olds to 40% of 8 year olds).

Advergames persuade children subconsciously

Research suggests that children are influenced by advergames subconsciously. Their cognitive capacity is engaged elsewhere when playing the game, and there is not enough resource available for them to stop and think about the purpose of the game, or to engage any scepticism about the source of the message embedded in it. Findings consistent across many high-quality studies (published in top, double-blind peer reviewed international journals), show that children do not understand that they have been exposed to advertising, and often do not even recall seeing the brand placed in the game, but yet their opinions and behaviour are affected. This is sometimes called the "mere exposure" effect (Hang & Auty, 2011; Owen et al, 2012).

Unless children are made aware – before, during and after they play advergames – that they are experiencing an attempt by a commercial company to sell them something or persuade them to develop a positive attitude towards their brand, the use of this technique contravenes the principles behind CAP 2.1.

Voluntary pledges do not work

An additional issue that has been highlighted by academic researchers, is the effectiveness of the voluntary pledges for food marketing to children that have appeared since the global obesity crisis was recognised. For example, pledges to limit advertising messages encourage healthy lifestyle choices, reduce the use of licensed characters, eliminate paid product placement and even require advergames to only feature "better for you" products. As far as advergames are concerned, a recent study shows that they are ineffective, yet afford good PR for the companies involved. A study published in the Journal of Consumer Affairs (Quilliam et al, 2011) found that only 33% of pledge signatories included healthy lifestyle information in the advergame compared with 47% of non-signatories, and only 13% of signatories advertised healthy foods in comparison with 37% of non-signatories. The authors conclude that voluntary pledges of this sort, "appear to meet public needs but in reality may be more accurately described as attempts to deflect attention and quiet the industry's critics," (p. 244).

Policy implications

Based on this scientific evidence, we recommend the following actions:

1. Immediate requirement for an obligatory, clear, uniform labelling system for all children's advergames and in-game advertising.

2. Public debate on whether advertising techniques that persuade children subconsciously should be legal.

3. Requirement for regulations that apply to advertising of HSSF products on TV to extend to children's websites.

4. Public consultation on the status of voluntary pledges within advertising regulation.

5. Public consultation on whether a children's arm of ASA or an independent council should be set up to oversee marketing to children across all media platforms.

Brief methodology

This research was undertaken in late 2012, and involved reviewing the published research on advergames and children around the world.

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More on this research:

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