

# Ethical issues about kids targeting

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**Abstract:** Digital marketing practices have gained an increasing theoretical attention. Most studies concentrated on issues related to Marketing ethics in the context of traditional media. This paper is a literature review that aims to focus on ethical issues surrounding targeting in the digital marketing era. This article is a theoretical review that presents a conceptual analysis about marketing ethics in children targeting which is merely based on relying on secondary sources of recent data. In this paper, we will concentrate on specificities of targeting in the digital marketing context and children targeting that evolve continuously to sway kids purchasing decision.

**Keywords:** Digital Marketing Ethics, Marketing Ethics, Data privacy, Deceptive marketing, Children targeting

## I. INTRODUCTION

The world today is living an unprecedented situation, due to the digital transformation. The phenomenon that influenced organizations especially on the transformation process itself Morakanyane et al. (2017). The new digital era is characterized by the widespread use of the internet, this powerful tool that allows organizations to reach their prospective customers. This new digital market is a fertile ground for organizations, full of opportunities, to communicate and to reach people worldwide.

Marketing is the function that has the most interactions with stakeholders, especially costumers. And it happens for this function to be referred to as manipulative and dishonest by affecting consumer sovereignty, and not really contributing to the welfare Marino, V et al (2020).

Marketing ethics is the branch of knowledge that studies how ethical or moral standards are applied to marketing decisions Abdulnasir AM (2015), same goes to all marketing branches and types. As the subset of business ethics, marketing ethics is also defined by Laczniak (2008) from a normative perspective, as practices that emphasize transparent, trustworthy, and responsible personal and organizational marketing policies and actions that exhibit integrity as well as fairness to consumers and other stakeholders.

It is also described as the field of applied ethics that deals with the ethical principles behind the function and regulation of marketing Alshurideh, M, et al. (2016).

A new field for marketing means new practices, and new practices raises new ethical issues ErkanÖzdemir(2010). In addition, ethical issues with e-commerce aren't much different from traditional commerce. However, ethical issues now have a many-sided nature, different expressions and scopes due to internet. The main objective of this paper is to first highlight

the specificities of targeting in digital marketing and second emphasize unethical practices about kid's targeting that emerge in digital marketing.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### I. Specificity Of Targeting In Digital Marketing

Targeting is the most important step in marketing strategy, it is a determining element for the success or the failure of an advertising campaign. Nowadays, targeting is more sophisticated thanks to new technologies. These technologies enable companies to offer product recommendations in real time to customers who return to their website, thanks to the advancement in the analyzing of the individual data Lambrecht, A et al. (2013). These technics highlights the specific products that the visitor was browsing before leaving the website, and it may help them increase sales.

Digital marketing targeting is more specific and efficient comparably to traditional targeting, explained by the massive data that companies use to well know customers and also to create profiles about them so they can reach them on an individual level. The amount data that companies have on their prospects, allow also to behaviorally target them, and provide them with ads that they will find of greater interest. Behavioral targeting is what is known as a form of online marketing that uses advertising technology to target web users based on their previous behavior. Thanks to cookies, IP address and Web bugs, marketers understand the key aspects of their customers' digital identity: what they like or ignore, the amount of money they are willing to spend on their shopping cart; the search terms they use, and the websites they like Chester (2012).

Presently, targeting has more specific points by comparison with targeting in the era of traditional media. In addition to what we said earlier, mobile targeting, location-based targeting and the use of tools such as Google AdWords and Facebook ads are the major point that affect and help increase the efficiency of targeting.

### I. Mobile targeting

Mobile devices are an effective channel to attract many users. Mobile devices, including smartphones and tablets, can increase the productivity and efficiency of targeting to organizations. Currently, mobile applications are the center of concentration of research and development in most of companies. This can be very useful to companies aiming to collect consumers' data from mobile devices. Given the fact that smartphones and tablets with Wi-Fi capabilities can

interact with the network and pass information directly to network providers and ISPs (Internet service provider) Camilleri(2018).

The use of mobile targeting and advertising by companies, means more invasion of user's privacy, which is explained by companies as a way to help customers enjoy free apps and content, and see more related ads, however customers request higher privacy and limited behavioral targeting Rafieian et al. (2020). It is crucial that governments and regulators find a balance between consumer protection and business interests. A method that allows companies to use customers data to provide better services, related ads, and better customer experience, and interfere so targeting won't raise more ethical issues about data privacy. Additionally, so companies can also explain the purpose of maintaining consumer' data, as they should provide simple user controls; to opt in and out with different levels of data sharing.

### 2. *Location-targeted mobile advertising*

The latest advances in mobile communications and geolocation technologies provide marketers with a new way to target their audience based on their location Camilleri (2016). With this digital technology, marketers can customize advertisements and coupons according to individual consumers' tastes, geographic location and time of day, thanks to the ubiquity of these mobile devices Camilleri (2018). Companies now can reach customers not only based on their preferences and interests, but also based on the places they are in or they visited before. This works as follows: customers are physically located within a given geographic proximity of the company (cinema, shop...) they could be receiving ads related to these companies.

For the reason that Mobile devices are equipped with GPS, they represent a huge potential for marketers in term of providing information to customers in areas with a high and positive advertising effect. Opting to location-based advertising is certainly not an arbitrary choice, if it is widespread today it is because it adds opportunities for companies. As a direct marketing technic, it allows to individually reach the customer based on their location dynamically in the real time Bauer et al. (2016). Location based advertising also provides flexibility concerning content, which means that erroneous, out of date or expired information may be replaced quickly by remote access(*idem*).

### 3. *New advertising Management tools*

Google Ads and Facebook ads are the main advertising management tools that allow companies to reach their audience efficiently. These tools enhance the proficiency of targeting, by helping companies gain more visibility, upsurge leads and sales, and reach new customers Wozney, L et al. (2019). In following, we will explore more about the new features about targeting in the marketing digital era. "Paid search" for instance, is a technic that focuses on the text-based advertisement. In other words, it allows advertisers to target

users based on certain words entered in Google's search queries Balça, J, et al. (2020). In this way, ads will be displayed with the search results for this query, in return companies pay for each click done by customers, and more companies pay the more they get to be on the top of results. Furthermore, "Paid social" is different from Google AdWords because it allows customers find companies based on their interests. Which means that all your interests are translated to specific ads shaped to you. And by the interests we mean: posts you liked, shared or commented on, pages you like, accounts you follow, terms you enter as a search query and much more details. The main difference is that Google AdWords help companies reach new customers Antoun, C.(2016), and Facebook ads help customers find companies. These two-advertising management companies, uses the massive data they have on their users to create a profitable link between customers and companies.

### 4. *Kids behavior towards targeting*

It consequently shocks no one that youngsters are presented to an assortment of convincing messages each day. A considerable lot of these messages are presently as installed publicizing put in an engaging substance, for example, Mobile and PC games, YouTube, Tv screens, or films Naderer, B, et al. (2016). This type of mere targeting does not seem to be a critical issue, rather what is target to, to whom is targeted is very crucial point. Furthermore, since children's advertising literacy is less than that of grownups, and their incentives and capacity to deal with advertisements are lower, progenies mainly deal with advertising information through automatic emotional reactions De Jans, et al. (2019).

What makes the kids targeting more criticized, is the vulnerability these children to advertisement as mentioned below. According to Naderer, B. (2020), Children are especially defenseless against promotional efforts and respond to it strongly due of their as yet creating psychological and social aptitudes just as their lack in inhibitory control. As proven by ongoing discoveries that shows that youngsters are influenced by food promotions in their inclination for junky food and beverages in selection tasks performed shortly after exposure Naderer, B. (2020).

Moreover, kids tend to adopt the wanted behavior by advertisements, even if this means having bad consequences on their physical or mental health. As stated by Folkvord, F et al (2016) systematic research reviews have repeatedly shown that food advertising affects children's eating behavior. Given that most food publicizing advertising attractive, unhealthy food, it is viewed as a huge contributor of the current heftiness epidemic (Folkvord, F et al 2016; Vandevijvere, S, et al.2017; Allemandi, L, et al. 2018; Kearney, J, et al. 2020).

This leads us to a common conclusion which is: children are reacting positively with the advertising content and therefore adopt the wanted behavior by advertisers. In the next section we will focus on the means by which companies target kids and question their level of ethicality.

### III. CHILDREN TARGETING

#### 1. *Kids exposure to ads*

Children, nowadays, spend a lot of time in front of screens, and where they are screens, there are ads. And for marketers who want to target children, Internet is a very ideal medium, that allows direct contact between them and the target. The main reason companies focus on kids as a target is simply because they are the future. Carl Segan said “The visions we offer our children shape the future...”. But unfortunately, marketers These days are not treating children as shapers of the future, but as shoppers of the future.

The internet is widely used by kids and youngsters, who generally have a high level of competency with technology Park, E, et al. (2018). This growing use of Internet is explained by the entertainment children can get through communication with their favorite cartoon characters, reward games, interactive games and sometimes learning by using educational websites for homework and informal browsing. Nevertheless, despite the benefits of internet on children, accessing alone to some websites and mobile applications may lead to some ethical issues.

#### 2. *Ethical issues with kids digital targeting*

Children, as seen by marketers, have a power to influence parent purchase, and they are not only seen as existing customers but also as future customers (Lahouel, B, et al. 2020; Mikolajová, K. et al 2017). Targeting children is commonly known to advertise sweets and toys, nowadays, some marketers lean towards promoting products such as clothing, sport equipment, cars and other products meant for adults Mikolajová, K. et al (2017). What implicates lobbyists, parents and interested parts to question the ethical outcomes of such actions, especially that the digital marketing technics and the online environment in general are less regulated than in traditional media Aleksandra Krajnović et al. (2019). The problem with targeting children is advertising that is considered inappropriate for children, such as exposure to gambling, pornography or alcohol products.

Ads, by affecting kids’ brains, can also affect their bodies due to the major part that advertising of unhealthy food takes in the media (soda candy fast food). We think that the problem with online kids’ targeting is that they are often online alone, without any supervision from their parents. Parents don’t understand how kids are being targeted online and with which level and what content they are exposed to during their journey on the internet. This is explained by parent’s willingness to have some time for themselves after a long day of work, one of the reasons why kids get the device connecting them to the internet in the first place. Not to forget that using internet is a part of nowadays generation’s daily routine and culture and a major part of their lives.

Another ethical issue related to kids’ targeting is when schools get involved in the process. School used to be a place for

children unaffected by the advertisements and consumer information that spread throughout its world. Companies now are aware of the strength of the school environment in promoting their name and products. The school environment can attract a young audience. Marketers are keen to use this medium in many ways, including: sponsored educational material, sponsoring sports events or cultural events in schools and advertisements posted on classrooms and school buses for specific brands Sulaiman, A. (2016).

In 2019 Samsung in partnership with the Ministry of National Education of Morocco, distributed 1600 tablet for students, 100 primary schools in rural areas benefited. Lately during the pandemic of COVID-19, associations like AL Houda & Houd in Casablanca also distributed about 1000 Nokia’s latest smartphones to students to help them with distance learning. Such actions are more beneficial to companies, because it allows them to stamp their image in the spirit of children at a very early age. It is by creating engaging, interactive environments based on products and brand names, that companies shape brand loyalties from an early age.

#### 3. *Pester power effect and advergaming*

It is not new that companies’ concentration on kids is explained by researches that show that children’s influence on family purchasing decisions is widespread and increasing Baldassarre, F, et al. (2016). More importantly, children now have the ability not only to influence their parents buying decisions but also their elder siblings such as brother, sisters, and other family members Abbasi, M et al. (2020). This ability is called “*Pester Power*”. The pester power effect has encouraged advertisers to use bad factors for advertising to attract parents with young children Abbasi, M et al. (2020).

In addition, children having a vocal about what they want to buy or not, is explained firstly by the fact that parents lately are having fewer children so the expenditure per child increases, second parents are having children when they are beyond the struggle phase in their career which means that they are financially stable, and finally, working parents tend often to buy presents for their kids to make up for their lack of time to accompany their kids.

Children used to spend a lot of time in front of Tv, nowadays, they are in front of more screens and more screens means more ads. Today’s digital media is profoundly different from traditional media, by integrating elements such as interactivity, engagement, viral messaging, location-based targeting ... Digital marketing ways of advertising these days include games, banners, online videos, applications, reviews, comments, social media and advergaming which are games created by a firm for the explicit purpose of promoting one or more of its brands Rideout, (2014).

Children download and play more often free apps. In fact, such “free” apps are only free in monetary terms; they come with the price of potential privacy concerns Meng, W, et al. (2016). These free applications or games trades the app’s free

service for watching ads and gathering data collect about users and profile them Meng W, et al. (2016). These ads that appear while children use the game, are meant for purposes like “Reviving for free”, “Gain more points” or “pass the hard level”. The main issue here is that children are specifically vulnerable to embedded advertising techniques because they are extremely vulnerable to the persuasiveness of these advertisements, due to insufficient critical thinking skills and impulse restraint Radesky, J. (2020). In addition to the impact of such advertised games for kids, such as PUBG or other similar games that train children to be “killers” because it teaches its players how to use sharp weapons, firearms, and displays harassments, brutality, violence, and more Achmad, H et al. (2019).

What distinguishes digital media from the traditional one, when it comes to children targeting, is interactivity that allows children to actively participate and engages with the brand, secondly digital media can also be immersive which signifies that children and teenagers are in an environment fully branded, and more outstandingly these online advertisements can be based on data collected about the child or the teenager, about their location, interests, geographic location and demographic characteristics Naumovska et al. (2017); and the issue is that ads will be designed to be the perfect fit between kid’s imagination and desire and what the brand offers, and most of the time these ads are misleading and deceptive.

#### 4. *Deceptive advertising for children*

Given the fact that kids are more vulnerable to advertisements Young, B. (2020), deceptive advertising is one of the ethical issues surrounding the digital marketing area. Plus, some companies may use misleading or untruthful claims in advertising to overstate the benefits of their products. Every so often, misleading statements are deceptive, and companies can even use the truth to lie Wu, Y(2020). Same goes to online advertising, with the special case of e-commerce where customers make decisions related to the product based on the cognitive representation of reality Agag(2017). The exaggeration of products characteristics and benefits is one of many deceptive forms in e-commerce, already known in traditional commerce context.

Many unethical practices can be named in this context, for instance making promises that cannot be kept, puffery, dynamic pricing, spam email advertising ... and ethical issues continue to change colors and faces, as long as internet evolves. In some situations, shipping prices are a double or triple the price of the product itself. At the current pandemic situation (COVID-19) many websites follow the same strategy for some specific areas like North Africa, after a time where the shipping costs were used to make prices less comparable Frischmann et al. (2015).

#### *Ethical Issues With Customer Data Collection*

Data plays a major role in online advertising, and for digital marketing in general. It provides essential information to companies about their prospective customers so they can deliver a well personalized offer, and to improve the Customer relationship management (CRM). Customers’ data is collected by web analytics tools, such as google analytics and yahoo analytics, while they interact with the organization’s website R Kenny et al. (2012).

Web analytics tools allow companies to track user’s interactions with their website, so they can see the path of clicks and pages visited and how much time this user passes on each page R Kenny et al. (2012), in addition to the source that led him to the website, and other more specific information about age, geographical zone, etc. Furthermore, in the chase of well knowing customers, companies went from simple loyalty cards to ultra-modern video monitoring and GPS tracking systems Kelly D. Martin et al. (2012). Besides, in e-commerce customer is obliged to disclose some of his personal information to fulfill the online purchase process (e.g., their name, address, telephone number and credit card number. A data that costs millions. And companies now are leaning towards buying data from customers directly, like Datacoup, which is a small company, has paid customers in exchange for the right to access their social media accounts (such as Facebook and Twitter) and its credit and debit card transaction records Li, X (2020).

But in some cases, companies may misuse the personal data collected from customers, while others are committed to ethical practices. Unethical practices start with the way the website collects the data from users, such as cookies (small files that contain data for some websites in order to identify the carried session tracking, user identity and stored on user’s RAM Dong-Hui LI (2016)), this possibility of collecting large amounts of personal consumer data has caused a shift in consumer privacy issues Jacobson, J (2020). Facebook ethical scandal is a representative example, the in 2014 Aleksandr Kogan handed the data of about 87 million users to the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica, the data was used to create profiles about voters (persona) and their political preferences in order to better target voters and influence their emotions Hilary Tuttle (2018). of unethical use of data is what happened with Facebook in 2014 with, that

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

The article is a theoretical review that presents a conceptual analysis of the topic of marketing ethics in children targeting which is merely based on relying on secondary sources of recent data.

#### V. DISCUSSION

This paper as mentioned before, aims to illuminate readers about the main ethical issues surrounding the digital marketing activity, especially related to kids targeting. Marketers now are using sophisticated tools to get to their

targets, in a direct and personalized way, the thing that makes it harder to tell whether there as an ethical violation or not. Many authors such as (Jacobson, J (2020); D. Martin et al. (2012); Young, B. (2020); Achmad, H et al. (2019); Wu, Y (2020) stand against ethical violation related to ethical violations whether related to data privacy, children vulnerability to ads, deceptive advertising etc. Others such as Kumar, M. R., & Sharma, K. (2017) consider these violations are specific to marketers adopting a non-ethical behavior, and stand for the use of such technics for example using the pester power effect to influence parents behavior and increase sales as a result.

We believe that ethical issues existed as long as human species existed, and we do believe that as long as new marketing technics progress, the long ethical issues will continue to raise. We suggest that new marketing courses, and trainings focus more on the ethical aspect of marketing and teach ethics in parallel to marketing students considering them as future marketing practitioners.

#### *Paper Implications*

This paper implications are mainly related to the theoretical framework presented, that will, first, help marketing students understand and give more attention to the ethical aspect of digital marketing practices. Secondly, aware marketing students and practitioners of the huge effect of unethical marketing new practices on the relationship between brands and customers, especially kids and also improving advertising ethics requires a strong understanding of regulations and definitions. Organizations must, consequently, determine how they actually manner marketing that is ethically responsible. Finally, this paper presented new ethical questions about digital marketing related to privacy, data collection and children targeting so that future researches will focus more on these conceptual gaps

## VI. CONCLUSION

Marketing is the seen face of the organization, and because of its close relationship with customers, is being under the scope of researchers, questioning what is ethical and not, about every single detail, to ensure that customers would not get harmed or used negatively. Therefore, the emergence of digital marketing, made people more cautious than before. Subsequently, most of studies related to digital marketing ethics, same as our paper; have focused on cybersecurity and online privacy, concentrating on unethical practices. Despite, the need of digital marketing ethics is growing, and no matter how we think we know about unethical practices today, we may surely be surprised by what we will face tomorrow. We suggest that further studies should focus on customer ethics in the digital era, and how having marketing backgrounds can change the way customers behave and perceive unethical practices, and may it reduce or allow customer's skepticism about marketing, or may it allow these customers to identify companies' ethical wrongdoings. And so, we interrogate: to what extent does children targeting improves the efficiency of

advertising? And how can companies keep targeting children while adopting an ethical approach? and what are the incentives of different players in the advertising industry to engage in user-tracking and behavioral targeting?

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