

A Study of Ethical Issues in Advertising to Minors in the Digital Age

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Abstract: Digital algorithms have deeply affected all aspects of human society, and also reconstructed the forms of advertisement expression and ethical level, among which the impact on minors is particularly profound. This paper firstly introduces the manifestations and types of advertising ethical problems related to minors in the digital era, and then analyzes the reasons for the emergence of advertising ethical problems of minors from the directions of insufficient external constraints of government departments, serious phenomenon of profit-seeking of capital in the advertising industry, and low threshold of advertising release on platforms. At the same time, it points out the negative impacts, such as the Tacitus Trap which disintegrate the public trust, and the manipulation and training of minors by trashy advertisements. Finally, it tries to put forward countermeasures and suggestions to deal with the ethical problems of minors' advertisements.

Keywords: Advertising Ethics; The Digital Era; Minor

Introduction

The word 'ethics' is originally of ancient Greek origin and refers to the nature and personality of a person. 'The Advertising Ethics and Regulations' defines advertising ethics as the sum of codes of conduct and norms that regulate the relationships between people arising from advertising activities, as determined by specific socio-economic relationships[1]. Faced with mixed advertising messages, minors are very easily misled. However, in the digital era, the hidden nature of undesirable advertising information has increased and the situation has become diversified. So it is particularly important to raise the awareness of minors' group of the risk of ethical misconduct in advertising as well as preventive measures.

1. Ethical issues in advertising for minors in the digital age

New types of advertisements continue to rise which makes the ethical issue of underage advertisements deepen and increase further.

1.1 Digital technologies deepen forms of vulgarization

1.1.1 Pop-up ads

Learning softwares frequently pops up junk advertisements with inappropriate images, which seriously affects the learning experience of minors. Learning software as a sacred temple for storing knowledge is constantly invaded by trashy advertisements, which misleads the value orientation and mental development of minors.

1.1.2 Search Engine Advertising and Bidding Advertising

In 2022, according to the Southern Metropolis Daily reported that during the period from June 13 to July 5, the reporter carried out a practical test on eight commonly used search engines, in 360, Sleiipnir, Baidu, Sogou, the four extremely commonly used search engines for 'minors', the key words of the search found that these search engine sites have obvious guidance of undesirable information, and even the phenomenon of attracting traffic for vulgar information and illegal links.

1.2 AR Bridges the Boundary between Virtual and Reality

Fox Germany and Sky Austria have joined forces to create zombie versions of bus stop AR ads to celebrate the successful release of the fifth season of The Walking Dead. While this was a creative move, it left unsuspecting people in shock and even made many children cry, causing some psychological damage to minors.

1.3 Short video ad design traps

In May 2022, a young girl named Xiao Yun was attracted to a short video advertisement about 19.9 yuan acne removal when she was watching a video using a short video platform. After that she experienced the acne removal product service at the offline store. However, Xiao Yun found that 19.9 yuan was just the introductory price, and after doing a set of acne skin care treatment, she was forced to spend viciously and take out a loan. Xiao Yun is not a special case, many minors fall into the debt trap of short-video advertisements because of adolescent appearance anxiety.

2. Reasons for the emergence of ethical problems in advertising for minors in the digital age

2.1 Theoretical level

2.1.1 Theory of cultural industries

The Frankfurt School's Adorno scholars once put forward the theory of the cultural industry[2]. The current stage of advertising production activities also shows a serious trend of homogenization, which makes the boundary between adults and minors in advertising content disappear and become mere commodities on the industrial production line. Big data push through unified user profile modeling. Advertising campaigns ignore the differences between adults and minors, creating an artificial disconnect that treats minors only as an audience that is 'interesting to children', resulting in a serious impact on minors in some advertising content.

2.1.2 Gatekeeper theory

The gatekeeper theory was firstly put forward by Kurt Lewin in 1947, which refers to the fact that only the information content that conforms to the norms of the group. In the digital age, the main body of the gatekeeper is constantly changing, from 'professional community' to 'multiple subjects'. At the same time, the process of gate-keeping has become more secretive, the content more complex, the difficulty of gate-keeping has increased, and the value standard of gate-keeping has also wandered.

2.2 Practical dimensions

2.2.1 Government Sector

Laws and regulations are lacking, and the way in which government departments are restrained is out of step with the development of the times. The imperfections in laws and regulations make the cost of media misconduct low, and do not serve as a deterrent to lawlessness.

2.3 Advertising industry

The bottomless design of advertisements and the lack of advertisement verification have led to the prevalence of the eyeball economy in the advertisement industry. The phenomenon of 'bad money driving out good money' has resulted in the sinking of quality content due to the kettle effect.

2.3.1 Social platforms

Ineffective regulatory accountability and low penalties on social platforms have emboldened companies that publish vulgar advertisements, polluting the online environment and poisoning countless minors.

2.3.2 Digital technology

The use of digital technology has led to the generalization of subjects, the dissolution of advertising boundaries, and the forced visualization of privacy. Big data technology has become the perfect assistant for cybercriminals, who have seized on the immaturity of minors' sense of prevention to commit low-cost crimes and constantly violate minors' personal privacy.

3. Negative impact of the ethical issue of underage advertising in the digital age

3.1 Government Sector

Some online advertisements have deepened the harm done to minors, disintegrating the public's trust in the government, which is caught in a Tacitus trap. The intensification of the communication gap is not conducive to the cohesion of social consensus and the advancement of public opinion guidance.

3.2 Advertising industry

Massive amount of information floods the advertising industry, attention has become a code of effectiveness for advertisers, and under the guidance of this logic, it is extremely easy to produce more misbehavior that harms minors under the guidance of traffic.

3.3 Minors

Internet generation minors are easily manipulated and disciplined by advertisers through content delivery, caught in the vortex of consumerism under the culture industry, objectified and alienated. They become irrational followers of advertised content, even focusing on consumer symbolism, while ignoring the costs that come with it.

4. Measures to address the ethical issues of underage advertising in the digital age

4.1 The Government steps in

The government can make use of intelligent technology to enable the Internet advertising monitoring data platform, and the market supervision department's monitoring system to form an effective connection to complement each other, and effectively improve the level of modern advertising supervision. Therefore, there is no place for those junk advertisements that infringe on the rights of minors to escape.

4.2 Platform enhancements

Social platforms can add cluster analysis and correlation analysis to advertising and marketing, and carry out digital modeling of massive user data. In this way, the information needs of the minor group and the adult group can be well differentiated to ensure the reception of healthy information for minors, such as Tmall's DeEP mental model. At the same time, social platforms should also block out undesirable advertisements and information that affect the physical and mental health of minors through technical identification of keyword shielding. It is also important for platforms to improve reporting mechanisms and reshape the standards of the cultural industry, such as 'Weibo Community Convention', which prohibits users from posting advertisements that jeopardize the health of minors.

4.3 Industry self-regulation

4.3.1 Innovation of New Advertising Agency Models

The advertising agency model should be developed towards the intelligent transaction stage, using the intelligent management platform to autonomously automate the analysis of users and relying on artificial intelligence to complete the advertisement placement, so as to realize the intelligent and advanced matching of business and reduce the phenomenon of minors' private information leaking on the Internet.

4.3.2 Innovations in advertising production

Through the use of technology, advertisements become rich and diverse in content and form, bringing users an all-round experience. For example, the Shanghai Baoshan District Procuratorate creates MG public service animation advertisements to call on society to protect and care for the physical and mental health of minors, which is highly innovative.

4.3.3 Innovations in advertising distribution

Friso has formed a whole cinema through the model of CCTV 3D Movie Media's Screen Giant Formation - a nationwide network of pre-screening advertisements in high-end theaters. This is a perfect combination of movies and advertisements, which deeply attracts a wide range of user groups and realizes the effective circle-breaking of advertisements.

4.4 User Thinking

4.4.1 Parents

When parents accompany their children to see advertisements, they should help their children rationally analyze the information in the advertisements, distinguish false advertisements, and shape the correct concepts.

4.4.2 Schools

Schools should set up a specialized school advertising management department to strengthen the campus regulatory mechanism.

Schools should not indulge and ignore undesirable advertisements and actively guide the development of commercialization of campus culture.

4.4.3 Minors

It is important to strengthen privacy safeguards and the ability to recognize objectionable advertisements among the underage population. Minors should also be provided with the right to opt out of 'anti-connectivity' in a social arena of information overload.

Conclusion

At a time when new media are constantly breaking new ground, the adherence to excellent creation of advertising content and correct guidance of advertising values will still be continued, and the protection measures for minors will continue to be improved, emphasizing the positive guidance of advertising on the healthy development of minors. The spirit of advertising is also the spirit of human nature, advertising still need to maintain the spirit of criticism, so that the imagination of fame to give way to the return of faith. And this is not only the obligation of the advertising industry, but should also be the responsibility of every communication subject in the society.

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