

Media in the family

● Advertising and cost traps



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Dealing with online advertising and cost traps

Children and young people as the target of advertising

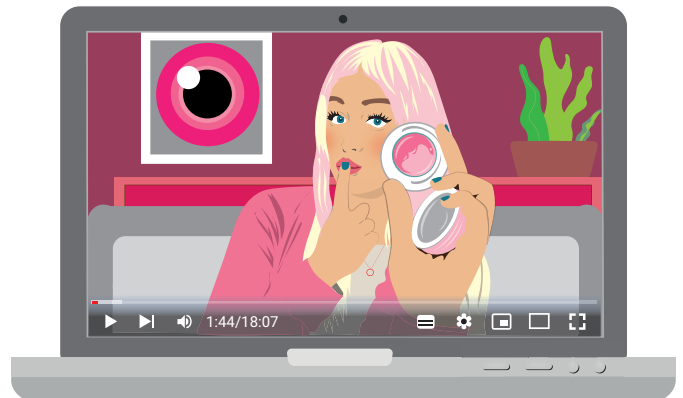
You encounter advertising almost everywhere – as soon as you step out of the house, open an app on your smartphone or switch on the TV.

The basic objectives of advertising are always the same: to boost awareness of a product, persuade people to buy it, retrospectively validate purchasing decisions, strengthen the bond between customers and the product, and set the product or brand apart from the competition. Children and young people are a particularly important target group for advertisers, as they often find it difficult to withstand the impact of advertising and don't yet grasp what purpose it serves. This ability is only developed from adolescence onwards. Advertising is often designed to appeal specifically to children – for instance featuring short, amusing stories or simple melodies and texts that are easy to remember. If a favorite character from a series or film is depicted on or associated with a product, children and young people tend to find it particularly attractive. This type of advertising is known as merchandising.




Media in the family 🎧 Advertising and cost traps

Influencers in particular – depending on their reach and number of followers – can hold a big sway over the purchasing decisions made by children and young people. Influencers are popular advertising vehicles due to their proximity to and relationship of trust with their followers. However, commercial interests are behind many ostensibly personal recommendations, with the influencers receiving something in return for advertising products (e.g. via affiliate links).



There are many different types of online advertising in particular. On websites, social media sites, streaming and gaming platforms and in (gaming) apps it often appears as in-app advertising, which is intended to encourage purchases. Online advertising is often aimed at getting people to buy something or take out a subscription inadvertently or unwittingly. Many online offerings are financed by advertising, among other things.

The FAQ video “Media in the family – Advertising and cost traps” contains answers to questions frequently asked by parents, as well as additional tips on the topic.



FAQ video “Media in the family – Advertising and cost traps”

🎧 To the FAQ video

What challenges does online advertising entail?

- Online advertising is **often hard to spot**, for instance when it looks like a post on social media or when brand names of other products are used in games.
- Advertisers **collect personal data** and user data e.g. via surveys, competitions. The data is sold and you are sent spam mails or personalized advertising as a result.
- Online advertising can promote **content that is not age-appropriate**, such as violent games, erotic offerings and online gambling.
- Online advertising can be disturbing, irritating and frightening. It is often **intrusive** and **confusing**. As a result, it you may accidentally end up clicking on an ad instead of clicking it away.

Legal boundaries of advertising: Advertising is also subject to regulations. These are set out in the Interstate Treaty on the Protection of Human Dignity and Minors in Broadcasting and Telemedia (Jugendmedienschutz-Staatsvertrag, JMStV) and include the stipulation that alcohol and tobacco advertising may not be aimed specifically at children. ^[1]



Business models and hidden costs in digital games

Alongside full versions of digital games, for which payment is required, free-to-play games are particularly popular. These are often apps that can be downloaded free of charge, for instance from the App Store or Google Play Store. But game developers want to earn money, so in most cases game apps of this kind are not really free. Ostensibly free games in particular can be based on business models that are not apparent at first glance.

- **In-game or in-app advertising:**

Game developers can use **advertising** to generate profits: small advertising banners or images are displayed and advertising in the form of video or audio clips is played in free-to-play games. Watching ads is often rewarded with in-game benefits, or ads may be deliberately used at specific points in the game (e.g. before a new level). If you click on the ad, you are often redirected from the game to another page.

Bear in mind that the advertising messages played may depict unsuitable topics, e.g. content that is not age-appropriate.

- **Player and usage data:**

The **collection of personal data** (such as name, age, email address, game duration, playing time, location or address book) enables games to tweak their offering and display appropriate purchases, messages, personalized advertising and the like to players. User data can also be resold for advertising purposes, among other things. In many cases, this data can no longer be retrieved, or only with great difficulty.



● In-game purchases:

In most free-to-play games, new virtual content can be purchased in-game to make the game more interesting or even easier, e.g. items for a particular character, special weapons or a new life. These extra contents (in-game purchases) are often not paid for with real money in the first instance, but with in-game currency such as coins or gems which can either be collected in the game or additionally purchased. It is easy to lose track of your actual outgoings when paying with in-game currency. Loot boxes are another business model in free-to-play games. These are boxes whose contents can only be inspected after you have bought them.



Watch the video "What is a loot box?" to find out more about business models and cost traps in digital games.



Video "What is a loot box?"

🎮 To the explanatory video





Tips for dealing with advertising and cost traps

Recognize and categorize advertising

Distinguishing between advertising and content is not always easy, especially online. In radio, television and print media, advertising is distinguished from the editorial content, i.e. the program or article, by a separator such as a sound signal or image. Many online providers don't comply very strictly with the obligation to flag advertising. In digital games in particular, advertising (e.g. for additional items or other games) is often not easy to spot as such. The colorful advertising banners tempt users to click on them, which often results in players making an inadvertent purchase or being redirected to another page.

Be aware of the objectives of advertising

Advertising is specifically designed to make people want to buy the advertised product. It is thus important that your child learns to question advertising at an early age, asking for instance if a product can really live up to the claims made. Advertising claims and actual features can often differ widely.

Discuss purchases together

Before making purchases, you and your child can discuss why they really want this new item. It often helps to consider whether you really need a particular product or whether there are alternatives. Products are often closely linked to advertising ambassadors such as celebrities or influencers, who are paid a lot of money to lend their name to a particular product. Fans shouldn't buy everything just because a star they admire advertises it or the product bears the star's name.

Categorize personalized advertising

If you search for specific things online over a lengthy period of time, the advertising windows adapt to this content. This is known as "personalized advertising". Over time, internet providers collect a lot of information about users and their preferences and present them with customized advertising windows. Personal details from social media sites and online games are also used to this end. So, make your child aware of the need to take good care of their own data and reveal it sparingly, especially when using the internet and playing digital games.

Set up ad blockers

Ad blockers allow users to surf the internet without being disturbed by annoying pop-up advertising windows or flashing banners. You and your child can install these blockers in the browsers of the devices they use. They can be downloaded free of charge for the most common browsers.

Protect yourself from hidden costs

Many colorful online advertising windows flash with tempting offers. However, you should be particularly careful with ostensibly free or one-off offers, which often entail hidden costs. In apps and digital games, you can make a purchase or even take out a subscription very quickly by clicking on an advertising banner. Virtual in-game currency and in-game purchases also often make it hard to keep track of the actual costs. Agree with your child that they should not click on anything hastily online and should only order something online or make an in-app purchase in consultation with you. This will prevent your child from falling into a cost trap. Unintentional in-app purchases on smartphones and tablets can be disabled or password-protected either via settings on the device (depending on the manufacturer) or in the respective app store itself.

Tip: The online portal **Medien kindersicher** offers support with specific settings, e.g. for disabling in-app purchases and personalized advertising as well as for setting up third-party blocking for various browsers, services and apps:

 www.medien-kindersicher.de

Bear in mind that, as a parent, you are also a role model and can influence how your child deals with advertising and brand messages and the extent to which their purchasing decisions are based on such factors. Help your child to question advertising claims and to consider the “bigger picture”, such as value for money, whether a product is really useful, under what conditions it was produced and whether the quality is right. This also encourages children and young people to question the advertising image of a product and to consider criteria other than advertising and brand image when making a purchase.

Further information and assistance

The following websites contain German-language links to advice centers and offers of help. Websites can generally be automatically translated into other languages via the browser settings (e.g. in Chrome) or via browser extensions (so-called add-ons). Alternatively, the internet address of the required site can be entered into an online translation program (e.g. Google Translate), which will translate the contents into the desired language.



Advice centers and assistance

Juuuport

🌐 **Juuuport** is a nationwide online advice center run by young people for young people. It provides help on various online topics and problems. Teenage and young adult volunteers help their peers with online problems such as cyberbullying, social media stress, data misuse, excessive media use and fake news.


Verbraucherzentrale Bayern

In the event of data misuse, victims can contact the 🌐 **Verbraucherzentrale Bayern** (Bavarian Consumer Advice Center) for support. It offers advice by telephone, online or on site, as well as giving tips on issues relating to advertising, rip-offs and online trading and providing sample letters, e.g. for problems with unwanted subscriptions or objections to telephone bills.


Complaints bodies

No matter which complaints body you contact, your complaint will always end up with the responsible institution.

Bayerische Landeszentrale für neue Medien

The  Bayerische Landeszentrale für neue Medien (Bavarian Regulatory Authority for New Media) is the state media authority responsible for regulating advertising in private broadcasting. It handles complaints and imposes sanctions in the event of advertising violations.

Deutscher Werberat

The  Deutscher Werberat (German advertising standards authority) handles complaints about advertising. It is responsible for business advertising, but not for advertising by political parties, associations, churches, non-governmental organizations and the like. If a submitted complaint does not fall within the remit of this authority, it will forward the complaint to the competent body.

Further information offerings

Ins-netz-gehen

🌐 www.ins-netz-gehen.de

The information portal of the Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung (Federal Center for Health Education) gives an overview of the types of cost traps that can lurk in game apps, video and online games. It provides tips on how 🎮 **parents** can protect themselves and their children from cost traps and how to prevent unwanted spending.

Internet-ABC

🌐 www.internet-abc.de

This Internet-ABC 🎮 **for parents** site offers information on where children can come into contact with online advertising and describes how to explain advertising and its aims to children. There are also tips and suggestions on how to empower them to handle advertising and avoid cost traps.

Saferinternet.at

🌐 www.saferinternet.at

The initiative provides comprehensive information on where children are confronted with online advertising, what types of advertising exist, where cost traps lurk and how parents can support their children in dealing with advertising and cost traps, among other things.

SCHAU HIN! Was dein Kind mit Medien macht

🌐 www.schau-hin.info

The initiative's website explains why advertising can be particularly problematic for children, what forms of online advertising exist and what role influencers play in advertising. Parents are given tips on how they can support their child when it comes to online advertising.

References

- [1] Kommission für Jugendmedienschutz, die medienanstalten (ed.): Staatsvertrag über den Schutz der Menschenwürde und den Jugendschutz in Rundfunk und Telemedien (Interstate Treaty on the Protection of Minors in the Media (§ 6 Abs. 5 JMStV)).
Internet: https://www.kjm-online.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Rechtsgrundlagen/Gesetze_Staatsvertraege/Medienstaatsvertrag_MStV.pdf [accessed: 22.05.2024]

Imprint

Concept: BLM Stiftung Medienpädagogik Bayern

Editing of abridged version of German-language material: Annalena Bushoff, Amelie Hofmann
(BLM Stiftung Medienpädagogik Bayern)

Translation of abridged version: Leinhäuser Language Services GmbH

Editing of German-language material: BLM Stiftung Medienpädagogik Bayern

Typesetting and layout: Leinhäuser Language Services GmbH

Illustrations: Peter Weber Grafikdesign

The materials produced are partly based on existing materials from the Medienführerschein Bayern funded by the Bavarian State Chancellery (Bayerische Staatskanzlei).

Grades 1 and 2: "Werbung weckt Wünsche – Werbung erkennen und durchschauen" (Advertising awakens desires – spotting and seeing through advertising) (author: Prof. Dr. Barbara Brüning)

Grades 3 and 4: "Schein oder Wirklichkeit? Botschaften in Werbespots analysieren und bewerten" (Fact or fiction? Analyzing and evaluating messages in commercials) (authors: Marc Doerfert, Anja Monz, Stefanie Reger)

Area of special educational support: "Gamen, daddeln, zocken – Digitale Spiele hinterfragen und verantwortungsbewusst nutzen" (Gaming – questioning digital games and using them responsibly) (author: Annette Pola); "Liken, posten, teilen – Social-Media-Angebote hinterfragen und sicher nutzen" (Liking, posting, sharing – questioning social media sites and using them safely) (author: Selma Brand)

Grades 5, 6 and 7: "Ich im Netz I – Eigene Daten schützen und mit Bildern verantwortungsvoll umgehen" (Going online I – protecting your own data and using images responsibly) (author: Dr. Kristina Hopf); "Fakt oder Fake? Glaubwürdigkeit von Online-Quellen prüfen und bewerten" (Fact or fake? Checking and evaluating the credibility of online sources) (author: Stefanie Rack); "Meine Medienstars – Inszenierungsstrategien durchschauen und hinterfragen" (My media stars – seeing through and questioning presentational strategies) (author: Kim Beck)

Grades 8 and 9: "Im Informationsdschungel – Meinungsbildungsprozesse verstehen und hinterfragen" (In the information jungle – understanding and questioning opinion-forming processes) (authors: Dr. Olaf Selg, Dr. Achim Hackenberg); "Ich als Urheber – Urheberrechte kennen und reflektieren" (As the originator – knowing and reflecting on copyright laws) (author: Dr. Kristina Hopf); "Produkt sucht Käufer: Werbung analysieren – Konsum reflektieren" (Product seeks buyer: analyzing advertising – reflecting on consumption) (authors: Christine Schulz, Undine Griebel, Anja Monz)

1st edition: Munich, 2024

German-language material: 1st edition: Munich, 2022

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The concept and production of this material was made possible by funding from the Bavarian Ministry of Education (Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Unterricht und Kultus) within the "digital school of the future" (Pilotversuch "Digitale Schule der Zukunft").

Bayerisches Staatsministerium für
Unterricht und Kultus



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