

Solution for harmful businesses targeting children

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Intro

In today's society, the world of business has evolved into an extremely powerful force. This results from the government's lack of regulation on the economy, which gives businesses the chance to flourish beyond standards to possibly contribute something greater in society. While this given freedom has its benefits, many can wrongfully use it. One major example being youth commercial targeting. Rachel Monroe, a journalist, states in her writing, *Ultra-Fast Fashion Is Eating The World*, that many fast fashion companies that aren't very well known such as DressLily, NastyDress, TwinklyDeals, TrendsGal, and FairySeason resort to using children, specifically girls between the ages 12-22, to advertise their products through social media. As an example, Tricia Panlaqui was only 15 years old when she started releasing fashion content on Youtube, where fast fashion companies such as Shein were using her to advertise their products (Monroe, 2021). Analyzing the psychology behind the decision to buy fast fashion products, a study conducted by Kathy Do and some other researchers, states that adolescents usually conform to positive behaviors exhibited by peers. Considering that fast fashion is viewed positively throughout most of society, most kids may look to gain fast access to fashion trends, which gives harmful businesses a chance to target them. Many of the main platforms this happens through is social media, where not only advertising is convenient, but the ability to make a product seem ubiquitous towards the target audience is much easier (Monroe, 2022). As a result, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) enacted the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) in 1998 prohibiting children under 13 from signing up for social media accounts. While this may have kept very young children safe, according to an academic source written by Emmanuelle Bartoli (2009), this policy didn't consider the idea that even adolescents (13-18) may not be capable of making the best decisions, meaning that they are also susceptible to

allowing targeting businesses to take advantage of them. As a result, many are considering raising the age requirement to 18 for social media; while others deem it as an ineffective solution. This conflict gives rise to an integral question: should the FTC (Federal Trade Commission) enact another policy of COPPA (Children's Online Privacy Protection Act) to raise the age requirement to 18 for social media to prevent these businesses from targeting children?

Despite popular opinion about including this regulation, the Federal Trade Commission should not raise the age requirement for social media to 18 to stop harmful businesses from targeting children because it is ineffective in stopping the possibility of age fraud accounts, which eliminate the goal of this cause altogether; even if adolescents obey this rule, benefits that a child gets from social media such as being more connected with communities and general information are suppressed. Instead, the FTC should add to the COPPA regulation by restricting the marketing of these products to stop the chances of harmful businesses from targeting youth because it isn't a weak policy where many can find loopholes through and at the same time, has shown to work before with other countries.

Age Fraud

Raising the age requirement for social media isn't an effective way to stop harmful businesses from targeting children because it isn't a strict enough guideline to prevent age fraud. Since kids tend to conform to their peers (Kathy Do et al, 2020), they will most likely be driven to get social media at a very young age. According to the FTC, COPPA won't prevent the possibility of children under 13 from lying about their age when registering for general audience sites/social media because these platforms don't require the user's personal information to be instantly given to them. This means that age fraud will still continue even if the age requirement for social media is raised to 18, which will give harmful businesses an opportunity to target these children. However, if the operator realizes that a user is under the age requirement later on, they

will send a COPPA notice and trigger parental consent requirements (FTC, 2020). While this regulation is meant to be followed, Lauren Matecki, a writer for the Northwestern Journal of Law and Social Policy, states that many websites work outside of COPPA regulations by making empty attempts to ban users under the age of 13. To support this, a survey conducted by congress to assess the enforcement of this rule for children under 16, out of 212 sites, 89% collected personal information of the user, whereas only 12% informed parents about their information practices (Bartoli, 2009). This indicates that the majority of social media and general audience sites don't really apply the parental consent COPPA regulation, suggesting that no matter the age restriction, age fraud will still continue because of the empty attempt and ineffectiveness of enforcing this COPPA policy. Therefore, harmful businesses will still have the chance to target children even if the age requirement for social media is raised to 18 given that age restrictions currently aren't working.

In perspective contrast, according to Alyson Klein, a writer for the EducationWeek organization, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bipartisan bill that would update COPPA by raising the age for parental consent protection to 16, not to be confused with age requirement, for social media platforms. Using this information, some may argue that this new policy combined with raising the age requirement to 18 for social media will eliminate the likelihood for age fraud. While this could work in theory, it doesn't consider the generational divide between adults and children which gives many parents the inability to assess the risks of surfing through the internet (Bartoli, 2009). This means that in places such as social media, many kids are still at risk and highly susceptible to committing age fraud even if their parents are given a notice for consent. Therefore, even with the recent modifications to COPPA, raising the age requirement to 18 for social media still isn't a viable solution.

Apart from being ineffective in preventing businesses from targeting children, raising the age requirement to 18 also suppresses the social benefits that a child gets from social media such as being more connected with communities and general information. According to the Raising Children Network (Australia), by using digital media, children have a sense of belonging and connection in communities, can explore around this platform to enjoy online activities and potentially learn about risk factors too. In consensus with this, an academic source written by Michelle O'Reilly, Nisha Dogra, Jason Hughes, Paul Reilly, Riya George, and Natasha Whiteman, states that social media can enhance an adolescent's informational dimension and expedite technical skills. If only 18 year olds and above could use social media, there would be a gap in technological knowledge in terms of managing a digital account and operating a phone, which will be detrimental to them in the future. According to Ron McGivern, the author of the *Introduction to Sociology*, people who are more proficient with technology tend to acquire marketable jobs in the future. Therefore, if COPPA raised the age requirement for social media to 18, many adolescents are missing out on technological skills useful for a bright future. Besides these obvious benefits of social media for kids, many criticize the medium by saying that it facilitates cyberbullying, sexual harassment, and many other disadvantages that are damaging to one's mental health. While the aforementioned consequences exist, many in opposition of social media don't consider that it can potentially promote mental health if used as a mechanism to converse about emotions and feelings (O'Reilly et al, 2019). According to a journal written by K. Latha, K. S. Meena, M. R. Pravitha, Madhuporna Dasgupta, and S. K. Chaturvedi, many mental health awareness campaigns can spread on social media platforms in order to recognize, manage, and prevent mental issues through suggesting help seeking behaviors. If kids have access to these resources, which are easily accessible through social media, they are more likely to be able to resolve any mental health issues they may have, or atleast feel more comfortable being a part of a community. As evidence shows by the Rutgers Center of Alcohol and Substance Use Studies, a

campaign that aligned the mental health breakdown after a breakup with the habit of smoking encouraged to “stay split up” and other positive steps to move on with life. As a result of this, statistics show that participants who have habits of smoking as a result of poor mental health, were likely to quit by 205% after joining this particular campaign because of their mental health issues being resolved. Given this impact, teens will benefit from social media.

However, many supporters of raising the age requirement for social media to 18 would claim that about 13% to 66% who excessively use it experience symptoms of depression such as anxiety as stated by the Child Mind Institute. Although, this does not apply to those who moderately use this tool as a way to communicate when needed. Those who have proper discipline and spend time creating meaningful social networks will gain the aforementioned benefits. Therefore, eliminating social media completely will only reduce the resources that a teen can reach out through.

Alternate Solution

Instead of raising the age requirement for social media, restricting the sales of harmful businesses on digital platforms is a better solution to prevent children from getting targeted for commercial benefit because it is a stronger policy that has worked before. Using tobacco as an example, according to a study (2017) conducted by Emily T. Hébert, Kathleen R. Case, Steven H. Kelder, Joanne Delk, Cheryl L. Perry, and Melissa B. Harrell, about 52.5% of students (youth) revealed that they were exposed to “tobacco-related social media”. To deal with this, many European countries in the past have enacted laws to prevent this. The United Kingdom, for example, has enacted the Tobacco advertising and Promotion Act (TAPA) in 2002 which prohibits the advertising of tobacco and alcohol products beyond retailer websites as stated by the World Health Organization Regional Office For Europe (WHO/Europe) in 2019. This has proved to be a strong regulation because marketing is restricted to all ages, including youth, and

violators of this rule would face clear consequences for breaching national legislation (WHO/Europe, 2019). As a result, according to a survey done by Karin A. Kasza, Andrew J. Hyland, Abraham Brown, Mohammad Siahpush, Hua-Hie Yong, Ann D. McNeill, Lin Li, and K. Michael Cummings, the change in awareness of tobacco was much greater in the United Kingdom than in other countries such as the U.S., who aren't too keen on restricting the advertising of this product.

However, the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC), an organization to control the spread of cancer by limiting external environments or substances such as tobacco that can cause cancer, reports that some social media companies argue that they have adopted a policy to ban the advertising and promotion of tobacco products such as cigarettes and e-cigarettes, but tobacco companies still manage to escape these weak policies through unpaid and influencer posts. As an example, in 2019, the TobaccoFreeKids organization campaign stated that Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter banned the advertising of cigarettes and e-cigarettes on their platforms and it has proven to be ineffective because tobacco companies could find loopholes by either using influencer marketing or advertising through social media posts instead. While these accounts state that the social media attempt to prevent the advertising of tobacco products proved to be ineffective, they only considered self regulating ban policies instead of policies at the federal level as seen in the United Kingdom. By adding the regulation of restricting sales of tobacco and other harmful products through COPPA (federal) rather than encouraging large social media companies to adopt this policy, the prevention of harmful businesses such as the tobacco industry from targeting youth will be much more effective as it has in the United Kingdom.

Conclusion

Despite there being many supporters of raising the age requirement for social media to 18,

restricting sales of harmful businesses at a federal level is an overall more effective solution in preventing children from getting targeted for commercial benefit because of the lack of loopholes that will come up when enforcing this policy as shown with past experiences such as the UK and at the same time, doesn't suppress a child from getting the aforementioned benefits from social media such as connecting with healthy campaigns. While the addition of this policy to COPPA seems to be viable, there still remains an argument whether it is ethical or not to suppress any business from advertising and participating in free trade practices considering that the U.S. is capitalistic and doesn't strictly regulate business. At the same time, if a substance or product is wrongfully spread and detrimental to society, the U.S. has the right to ban it. That is more of a priority at this stage.

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