



The marketing of unhealthy food and beverages in social media

– a focus group study of 13 and 15-year-olds

22 May 2017

Foreword

For many years, the Norwegian Consumer Council has been concerned about the exposure of children and adolescents to the marketing of food and beverages with a high content of sugar, salt and fat. The reason for this concern is that the marketing affects the preferences of children and adolescents and their consumption of food and beverages that give an increased risk of overweight and obesity. Marketing of food and beverages in social media is rapidly increasing, and it is a form of marketing that also has a powerful influence on children and adolescents. In many cases, adolescents become the actual driving force behind this marketing in social media because they become actively engaged in it.

With this study, we wanted to increase our insight into Norwegian adolescents' perceptions of and experiences with marketing in the social media in general and of unhealthy products in particular. We think that this provides important and necessary background information to help put increased protection of adolescents against the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages in the social media on the agenda. We think these findings must be considered in light of the current regulations and the self-regulation that exist in this area. Attention must be focused on the limitations that the Norwegian food and beverage industry have specified in their own guidelines.

This study was conducted at the Norwegian Consumer Council. The project group consisted of Senior Adviser Kaja Lund-Iversen and practical trainee Maja Bossum (a Bachelor's Degree student in public health nutrition at the Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences). Inger Johanne Axelsen was hired as a professional moderator to lead the focus groups. Senior Adviser Siv Elin Aanestad at the Norwegian Consumer Council, who has special expertise in qualitative studies, has provided input to the report. We would like to express our many thanks to the pupils who participated in the focus groups and to the teachers who facilitated matters so that we could hold group discussions at two schools in the urban districts of Grünerløkka and Sagene in Oslo.

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1 Introduction

Unhealthy diet in the population in general, and among children and adolescents in particular, is regarded as a significant public health problem (1). An unhealthy diet is largely due to a high intake of food and beverages with a high content of fat, salt and sugar. The reasons why children and adolescents develop unhealthy eating habits are numerous and complex, but in the last ten to fifteen years, the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages has attracted considerable attention. A substantial share of the food and beverage advertisements to which children and adolescents are exposed are for products that they ought to consume less of, not more, as they are encouraged to do by ads. A sound body of evidence documents that exposure to marketing of unhealthy food and beverages influences the preferences, demand and consumption of children and adolescents (2). Therefore, the protection of children and adolescents against marketing of products that contribute to an unhealthy diet and poorer health has already been on both the Norwegian and international health policy agendas for a number of years. Since the autumn of 2013, the Norwegian food industry has conducted a self-regulation scheme that is intended to prevent the exposure of children to the marketing of unhealthy products (See the sidebar on page 7 about the Norwegian Food and Drink Industry Professional Practices Committee (MFU)).

In this report, we focus on two questions related to this topic: to what extent are *adolescents* exposed to marketing of unhealthy food and beverages, and what marketing techniques are utilised in marketing in the social media.

In order to discuss these two questions, we have chosen to conduct a focus group study of adolescents aged 13 and 15. The objective of the study was to gain insight into the adolescents' own understanding of and experiences with the marketing of food and beverages in the social media.

Why adolescents

Minors are defined as a vulnerable consumer group and are therefore given special protection against marketing¹. In this report, we critically examine the age limit that the food industry has specified in the self-regulation scheme that it established in 2013. It is primarily children up to age 13 who are protected, even though there is also a rule that the food industry shall be cautious when marketing is aimed at adolescents.

Why social media

An increasing share of all marketing occurs digitally, and marketing in the social media shows the biggest increases². Marketing in the social media uses methods that have a particularly strong effect on adolescents (3). Studies also show that the use of social media and Internet-based entertainment increases considerably above age 12 (4–6). By the time children become teenagers, the vast majority of them have their own mobile phone, they often have their own money, and they are also master of their own leisure

¹ Cf. The Norwegian Marketing Control Act and the Norwegian Broadcasting Act.

² <http://mediebyraaforeningen.no/mediebarometeret-2016/>



time in a different way than when they were younger. This makes teenagers an attractive target group for commercial entities, not least of which are the food and beverage producers.

The primary aim of this report is to give a clear picture of the marketing practices of the Norwegian food and beverage industry in the social media and to discuss the consequences when these practices are targeted at adolescents. Although the adolescents with whom we spoke had a relatively high level of awareness about traditional advertising, they are less attentive to the marketing in the social media that is disguised as entertainment. The subtle advertisements to which they are exposed in the social media go under the radar of their conscious awareness. It is a public health-policy objective to protect children and adolescents against the marketing of unhealthy products. In our opinion, it is necessary to consider current regulations and the food industry's self-regulation scheme in light of the information presented in this report. A key question is how to achieve better protection of adolescents against the marketing of unhealthy products in the social media

2 Background

2.1 Norwegian adolescents spend the most time on the Internet in Europe

Today's children and adolescents are growing up in a digitalised world and become major users of the Internet and social media at an early age. In an OECD study of European 15-year-olds, Norwegian adolescents spend the greatest amount of daily time on the Internet of any nation in Europe (5). According to the Norwegian Media Authority's study from 2016 (6), one out of three 9–16-year-olds spends between one and four hours daily on social media, and the amount of time spent increases with age. The use of games, photo-sharing applications, chat services and other social media platforms is very extensive. The use of mobile phones has varied and evolved over time, and at present the mobile phone has a far more extensive area of use than it did before.

One of the clearest trends is a rapid increase in the proportion of children and adolescents who access the social media with a mobile phone. At age 11–12, there is a significant change in the use of social media. The main trends are that once children first make use of social media, they use them on a daily basis. 86 per cent of 15–16-year-olds state that they use social media every day. Over half of the girls (54 per cent) spend two hours or more on social media, compared with 34 per cent of the boys of the same age (6).

On a daily basis, online video services (YouTube, Vimeo, Netflix, etc.), music streaming, photo-sharing applications (Snapchat, Instagram, etc.) and digital social network services, such as Facebook, are the platforms that children and adolescents use most. More than 50 per cent of the participants in this study state that they use video services one or more times a day, and among boys the percentage of daily users is considerably higher than among girls, regardless of age. 75 per cent of the 15–16-year-old boys use online video services on a daily basis, compared with 46 per cent of the girls (6).



2.2 The marketing of unhealthy food and beverages in the social media

New studies keep coming out showing that children and adolescents in today's digital world are exposed on a daily basis to advertising while they are playing, being entertained, seeking information and knowledge and communicating with friends. A comprehensive research project that was conducted for the European Commission in 2016 revealed that a large amount of web-based marketing was aimed at children and that these marketing practices influenced the children's behaviour (4). Children and adolescents are an attractive target group for producers of branded products because the earlier in life that they develop a loyalty to a brand or a product and the earlier that a customer relationship is established, the stronger the bond, which the producers hope will last a lifetime³.

The advantage that the producers of branded products gain from marketing in the social media is that the marketing can be customised and targeted. Since the social media consist of personal, interactive platforms, different target groups receive different ads depending on gender, age, interests and even their state of mind. As for adults, children and adolescents' activity on the Internet has considerable effect on the types of ads to which they are exposed in the social media (7).

The food and beverage producers are very active in the digital marketing to children and adolescents, and the social media are just one of the platforms that they use. Giant multinational companies such as Coca-Cola and Pepsi are usually described as the pioneers of marketing in the social media (8). A study conducted by Consumption Research Norway (SIFO) in 2016 showed that the beverage producers in particular accounted for a considerable share of the marketing to which adolescents (age 12–17) were exposed on Facebook and YouTube (9). On Facebook, 95 per cent of the food and beverage ads were for unhealthy products, whereas the corresponding share on YouTube was 42 per cent. In addition to soft drinks, there are a great number of ads for chocolate milk, ice coffee and ice tea and sweets, snacks and fast food. This is in line with the findings in international studies (3).

In an American study where hypothetical profiles of children followed or liked the Facebook profiles of producers of unhealthy products, there were nearly 130 inputs in the form of new updates from these producers in the course of a two-week period (11). A SIFO survey conducted in 2013 revealed that the 13–17-year-old age group constituted the largest proportion of those who had liked the Facebook pages of producers and products that we define as unhealthy in this context (12).

³ <http://www.aftenposten.no/norge/Ettertraktet-malgruppe-for-merkevareprodusenter-485669b.html>



THE FOOD INDUSTRY'S SELF-REGULATION SCHEME TO PREVENT THE MARKETING OF UNHEALTHY FOOD AND BEVERAGES TO CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS (MFU)

In 2010, the World Health Organisation (WHO) approved recommendations for reduced marketing to children of food and beverages with high contents of fat, salt and sugar (2). Norway is obligated to follow up these recommendations. In 2012, the Ministry of Health and Care Services and the Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion considered the question of whether to introduce stricter regulations for this type of marketing.

In the spring of 2012, a regulation was proposed to forbid the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to children, but the Norwegian government decided to try the food industry's self-regulation model for two years before they decided whether to pass regulations. In 2013, The Norwegian Food and Drink Industry Professional Practices Committee (MFU) was established⁴, and the scheme was presented as a supplement to the special protection of children against marketing that was incorporated in the existing regulations.

MFU's guidelines specify illegal marketing methods and media channels. The regulations are limited to apply to marketing that is specially aimed at children up to and including age 12. Caution shall be shown when marketing is aimed at adolescents. MFU's committee is composed of the food industry's appointed representatives, plus independent representatives from the Norwegian Directorate of Health and from a non-governmental organisation (NGO) respectively. The committee handles complaints about marketing that are submitted to MFU. To be exonerated by MFU does not necessarily mean that there has been no violation of the Norwegian Marketing Control Act. The commercial practice may be illegal even though an entity has been exonerated by MFU because it only assesses cases in light of its own guidelines, not the Marketing Control Act. MFU's decisions are not enforceable, so they have little actual importance for those whom it judges.

In mid-2016, MFU published a self-evaluation for the period 2013 – March 2016, which described its activities and results, reported by the industry itself (10). The food industry updated its guidelines in September 2016 and included the social media at that time: "Examples of media that normally may be regarded as having a special appeal to children include social media such as chat services, blogging sites and social networks that are particularly aimed at children." It does not further specify which social media these are, but to a great extent children and adolescents use the same digital platforms and media as adults, such as YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram.

⁴ www.mfu.as



2.3 Marketing techniques used in the social media

The nature of digital technology and the interactive platforms used in marketing give commercial entities unique opportunities to influence consumer preferences and behaviour. The power of marketing in the social media is immense, especially when aimed at adolescents, who are in a vulnerable social, physical and psychological phase of their lives.

As already mentioned, targeted and personalised advertisements and marketing are key aspects of marketing in the social media. Through online marketing, advertisers can reach their target groups independent of the time and place. In addition, advertisers and platforms such as Facebook carry out a continuous monitoring of each individual user. If someone clicks on an ad, the sender knows immediately that the ad is effective. This becomes even clearer when it comes to the content marketing in the newsfeed on Facebook, where the number of *likes* and comments provide a valuable insight into how the ad affects the target group.

The techniques and methods that are used in the social media are significantly different from those that are used in traditional marketing. A broad range of sophisticated marketing techniques are employed in the social media, and the techniques are strategically selected in order to have the greatest possible influence on the target group.

In the Norwegian Media Authority's study (6), 28 per cent of the participants in the 9-16-year-old age group responded that it is sometimes difficult to determine when they are exposed to an ad on the Internet, in blogs and in the social media. Up to age 13, there is little difference between boys and girls. Among the older ones, there is a somewhat lower proportion of boys than girls who agree that it is difficult to distinguish an ad from other content. Most of those who completely disagree with this statement are boys. This finding reflects the participants' own assessment and not whether they actually are able to distinguish ads from other content. Since an extremely large number of ads are hidden, combined with other information, and difficult to perceive, there is reason to believe that the proportion who have difficulty recognising advertisements is actually even higher.

In social media, the producers of branded products develop relations with adolescents in a subtle way. Young people become active disseminators of the commercial companies' own messages. Marketing in the social media benefits from a network of relationships and connections that people have with each other. Commercial entities gather knowledge about the target group's choices and behaviour, and they employ emotional stimuli and the need for social inclusion, the latter of which is important to adolescents. Studies show that adolescents underestimate their own vulnerability to this type of marketing (13). The producers of branded products also recruit so-called young opinion leaders, who are influential in their circle of friends, to follow trends and contribute to branding and the spreading of information about branded products in their social network.

By becoming part of the adolescents' social network, the producers are able to get adolescents to get involved with the branded product. They get them involved and engaged through various techniques, such as engaging stories, surprises,



entertainment, competitions and humour. Gifts and prizes are other methods that are used to bond with the target group. All of this has the potential to generate engagement and positive feelings, which in turn are crucial in developing loyal consumers.

Triple-E – *engagement, emotions and entertainment* – are the most common marketing methods in the social media (11). Hence, this type of marketing is often called “advertainment” – the ad is conveyed through entertainment, amusing tasks and competitions, all of which make it less obviously an ad and thus more interesting to the target group (14).

Persons who appeal to children and adolescents, e.g. video bloggers (YouTubers), have considerable influence with their message. Sponsoring by athletes, including very young athletes, and YouTubers who promote and place products in their videos has become highly common because these persons appear to be credible and impartial sources in the promotion of the food industry’s branded products.

In addition to being omnipresent, personalised, network and relationship-based, engaging, absorbing and “genuine”, this type of marketing often involves user-generated content. That means that the target group itself creates and conducts the marketing by posting its own content and tagging and disseminating that content in the social media (8).

2.4 YouTube as a channel for entertainment and advertising

YouTube is an extremely popular entertainment platform among children and adolescents, but is also used for inspiration and learning. There is an enormous variety of video bloggers, or YouTubers as they are often called, who are persons with their own channel on YouTube. They have usually specialised in an activity or topic, and produce videos related to that topic. For video bloggers who have managed to attract many followers and subscribers, the activity on YouTube can become a significant source of income from advertising income and content marketing. Young video bloggers often convey their personal views and make an example of their own experiences. They often film the videos at home, and friends and family are involved. Since they share some of their privacy, followers feel that they get to know them. In addition, YouTubers can involve and interact with their followers by answering submitted questions and commenting on messages that the followers submit, e.g. during live streaming. This means that the relationship feels even closer.

Cooperation between commercial entities and video bloggers is extensive, in Norway as well. When producers of food and beverages enter into commercial agreements with YouTubers who have many thousand adolescents as followers, they can have enormous influence on the adolescents’ attitudes and preferences, and ultimately on their behaviour and consumption.

There are many different ways of incorporating commercial content into YouTube videos, for example. Content marketing means incorporating an ad into editorial content and converting ads into entertainment. This is often the case with YouTubers. It is crucial that the public be informed about the commercial content of the video. In



Great Britain, the regulatory authorities have looked at seven different scenarios for marketing under the direction of video bloggers⁵, e.g. product placement, pure advertising video blogs and sponsorship, and issued practical guidelines about how these films' commercial content must be made obvious to the public. The Office of the Consumer Ombudsman has also issued guidelines for the labelling of ads in the social media⁶.

In the focus group study, we wanted to take a closer look at three methods: engagement and encouragement to act, the use of competitions and the use of role models (YouTubers and athletes) as disseminators. To stimulate discussion in the focus groups, we needed examples of the marketing of unhealthy products in the social media, and we found these by going through the Facebook profiles of the major producers of branded products and by searching on YouTube. The examples that we chose all made use of humour and entertainment.

⁵ <https://www.asa.org.uk/advice-online/video-blogs-scenarios.html>

⁶ <https://forbrukerombudet.no/lov-og-rett/veiledninger-og-retningslinjer/forbrukerombudets-veiledning-merking-reklame-sosiale-medier>



DEFINITION OF TERMS

Marketing and advertising – in this study, we use these two terms somewhat interchangeably, although marketing has a broader scope than advertising and in this context means commercial communication under the direction of the food and beverage producers.

Social media – by social media here, we mean the media that are based on digital platforms where people communicate with each other in a many-to-many relationship and where the content is mainly created by the users themselves. YouTube is included among the social media in this study.

Online advertising – the type of advertising that is growing fastest and that has the advantage that it can be focused on extremely narrow target groups and can be immediately measured and thereby adjusted continuously in order to have an optimal effect. Online advertising can be placed in separate accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram or other sites, or as ads in the newsfeed.

Indirect advertising – advertising disseminated via an intermediary, such as an ad in the form of a logo and/or brand on an item of clothing. Another example is advertising through a famous athlete who ensures that an ad for a sponsor is shown on the TV screen during a sports broadcast. Use of opinion leaders or role models as intermediaries entails using persons with influence in the target group in the hope that those persons can influence their circle of friends and that others will follow their example.

Product placement – form of advertising that entails that a good, service or brand name is included, or referred to, in a programme in return for payment or some other form of compensation. This can be done in books, computer games, films, music videos or non-broadcast media (e.g. online) in order to display products, brand name or logo as an integral part of a story.

Content marketing – is a strategy that involves engaging people with the aim to develop long-term relations with a target group in order to achieve measurable commercial value. Common distinguishing features of content marketing are that it resembles editorial content and tells a relevant and valuable – preferably entertaining – story and is aimed at a specific target group.

Sources: <https://snl.no/reklame>, <http://contentmarketing.no/hva-er-egentlig-innholdsmarkedsforing-6-definisjoner/> and http://www.medietilsynet.no/mediebransjen/reklame/#anchor_582.



PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FOCUS GROUPS

Documenting the scope of the marketing of unhealthy products to which children and adolescents are exposed in the social media is difficult because this type of marketing is targeted, depending on the individual's Internet activity and network connections. Therefore, an exploratory approach is recommended (15). A qualitative method is well-suited for shedding light on issues where we want to understand why various target groups think and act the way they do, and as previously mentioned, we decided to use focus groups in this study. In focus groups, the information emerges in a social context where the participants respond to each other's viewpoints and inspire each other to new insights. A traditional focus group gathers between six and ten persons for an informal theme-based discussion, guided and led by a qualified moderator.

In order to recruit teenagers to the focus groups, we decided to go through the schools. We sent e-mails to head teachers at 14 schools in Oslo. Only one school in the Grünerløkka urban district responded positively. In this school, we had two focus groups composed of pupils from grade 10. In addition, through our network, we recruited a school in the Sagene urban district, where pupils in grade 8 participated. The pupils in grade 10 received a gift voucher worth NOK 300 as a show of gratitude for their participation. In accordance with a proposal from the parents of the pupils in grade 8, the money was directly deposited in an account for the funding of that grade's class trip. The contact teachers at the two schools obtained permission from parents and/or guardians.

The focus groups were held at the schools after ordinary school hours. Two group discussions were held in each school for a total of four groups. Since girls and boys have somewhat different media habits and because marketing is also often targeted with regard to gender, we chose to have groups composed solely of girls or boys. There were six pupils in each group with the exception of the group of 13-year-old boys, where there were only five. A professional moderator led each group discussion and used a discussion guide in order to ensure that all of the topics that we wanted to clarify were discussed in each group (see appendix). In order to stimulate discussion, a Power Point presentation with examples was used in the discussions, which lasted from 1 hour to 1 hour and 20 minutes. The discussions were recorded on a PC by The Norwegian Consumer Council's practical trainee, and recordings were also made with a dictaphone. The written records of all the group interviews were reviewed, transcribed and supplemented by listening to the digital audio recordings.



3 Adolescents are active on social media platforms and are exposed to much unhealthy advertising

3.1 In the social media morning, noon and night

Like most adolescents, those in the focus groups were active on social media platforms. They stated that they used Facebook (Messenger), Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, Musickly, Steam and Spotify. The most used platforms were Snapchat and YouTube, which all of them said they used regularly. The Instagram and Facebook platforms were also very popular. They checked the above-mentioned social media early in the morning, often right after they had woken.

"I wake up. The alarm clock is next to me; I use the alarm on my telephone, right? So the first thing I do is check my phone."
Boy, age 15.

Snapchat was one of the first things they checked in the morning to see whether they had received a snap from any of their friends. Snapchat doesn't take much time to check. Snapchat was used to send pictures with messages, and the 13-year-old girls said they used this platform mostly for chatting. The same was true of *Messenger*, Facebook's chat app. In addition, the 13-year-old boys used the game platform Steam for chatting. In other words, one of the social media's main functions is for brief conversations, *chatting*, with friends.

YouTube is the platform on which adolescents spend the most time, and mainly in the evening, with the exception of the 13-year-old boys, who also often check YouTube in the morning. YouTube was used for entertainment, but also as a source of information and as a source of inspiration, especially among the girls who said they followed various *YouTubers*:

"If there is something I want to know, I use YouTube."
Boy, age 15.

"Everything they [the YouTubers] post gives me inspiration, or I may think: 'Yeah, I can try that, or this is something I don't want to try.'"
Girl, age 15.

It also became clear that social media such as Facebook and Instagram were used to *like*, *tag* and comment on things that others had posted, but this was most common among the 15-year-olds. They rarely posted anything themselves, and when they did it was mainly on Instagram. It was regarded as a friendly gesture to *like* things that others had posted, and the same applied to *tagging*. *Tagging* is usually done to show that you are thinking about the person.

"I try to be interested in what people are doing. I try to maintain contact through liking."
Boy, age 15.



Both the 13 and 15-year olds with whom we spoke were active users of the social media, but they had somewhat different habits and areas of use. The social media are a key channel of communication for adolescents in their everyday life, and they develop and nurse relationships by sending and sharing pictures and by liking and tagging each other on various platforms. It is very common to use YouTube as entertainment.

3.2 Much advertising of unhealthy products in social media

When they were openly questioned about what they thought about advertising in the social media, all of the participants agreed that they were exposed to too many ads on the Internet. They think there are many ads for mobile games, mobile phones and Internet providers, but many also mentioned that ads for various cheeses were also quite frequent. The 13-year-old girls said that there were also some ads for various slimming products. The 13-year-old boys, on the other hand, were often exposed to ads for cars, especially on YouTube. Other examples that were mentioned included ads for gaming (Lotto), shampoo, eyeglasses, building materials, the Norwegian State Railways, yoghurt, the Norwegian retailer Rema 1000's Æ app and Coca-Cola.

After having spoken a little about advertising in general, we focused on the ads they had seen for food and beverages. Examples of food and beverage products for which many had seen online advertising were McDonald's, Pizza Grandiosa, yoghurt and Skyr, Pepsi Max, Coca-Cola, Fanta, Solo, Freia chocolate and Smash. Other examples that they remember included Farris, Noicy and Tine-milk.

"McDonald's ads I think – often the kind where you see a burger or ice cream or something for 10 kroner, and then at the end they say 'I'm lovin' it!'"

Girl, age 15.

The 15-year-old girls think there are many ads for food stores and cheese and generally unhealthy food, such as *snacks*, *McDonald's* and *soft drinks*. We asked the same question to the 13-year-old girls, and they all agreed that there were more ads for frozen pizza than anything else. The 13-year-old boys also thought that there were more ads for unhealthy food and beverage products, such as *soft drinks*, *sweets*, *snacks* and *chocolate* than for anything else.

In other words, the overall impression is that adolescents are exposed to a lot of advertising in general, and when it comes to food and beverages, most of the ads are for soft drinks, sweets, snacks and fast food, in addition to cheese and retailers.



3.3 Advertising as desired entertainment or an irritating waste of time

In the Norwegian Media Authority's study of children and adolescents' media habits (6), they concluded that two out of three children between the ages of 9 and 16 think that ads on the Internet, and in blogs and the social media are boring and irritating. One out of five responded that they think ads are amusing, but nearly half disagreed with that. In this study, however, the kind of advertising or marketing that the respondents should assess was not specified in any greater detail.

In our study, it is interesting to see how the adolescents clearly distinguish between entertaining and amusing ads and unwanted advertising. The unwanted ads are annoying wastes of time, whereas certain ads were definitely perceived to be amusing and entertaining. As we will note later, the ads with which they interact the most are the ads that entertain them and the subtle, indirect advertising that is presented as competitions.

Most of the respondents agreed that YouTube was the platform with the most ads, and the advertising films that come before the video they actually wanted to see were regarded as the most irritating wastes of time. The advertising on YouTube is not easy to avoid. Often you have to watch at least five seconds before it is possible to skip the rest of the ad if you want, and in some rare instances it wasn't even possible to skip the ad at all, according to the 13-year-old boys. Ads on other platforms, such as Facebook, were easier to ignore because all you had to do was scroll past them.

"It is usually possible to skip them [the boring ads], but if I hadn't been able to skip them, it would have been quite irritating."
Girl, age 13.

It is especially irritating when the same ad comes up again and again, which often happens on YouTube:

"There are times when it gets to be a little too much. In those cases, you will definitely not buy that product. For instance, on YouTube there are very many ads, sometimes several ads in one video. In such cases, I look at the product and think, I shall at any rate not buy that product."
Boy, age 15.

Pop-up ads are also regarded as irritating, and likewise web sites and blogs that are jam-packed with too many ads. Another aspect of advertising that annoyed the respondents was when the product looked different than it does in reality. This was the case, for example, with McDonald's, which they often thought presents its products looking better than they actually are.



Ads that are amusing, that are somewhat different, and that have surprising aspects, on the other hand, were perceived to be entertaining. The adolescents could search up these films on YouTube in order to see them again.

“The Snøfrisk ad with a goat that blows on a party whistle (LAUGHS). We saw that on YouTube. Like I’ve never tasted Snøfrisk, so it was only the ad I liked.”

Boy, age 15.

In short, adolescents feel that they are exposed to a lot of ads, particularly on YouTube and Facebook. These ads are not always felt to be relevant, as when cars, eyeglasses, groceries and subscriptions to mobile phones are advertised, and since they turn up everywhere, demand their attention and take time, they can also be irritating.

3.4 Easier to recognise traditional advertisements

When the adolescents talked about advertising in the social media, they mainly referred to traditional marketing, such as advertising films and ad banners.

When they were asked whether they thought it was easy to distinguish ads from everything else on the Internet and in the social media, most of them thought it was easy to recognise ads. The ways in which they recognised ads were that they included distinguishing features such as the product’s brand name and logo – e.g. they mentioned Elkjøp, Kiwi and other retailers – that a price is quoted, and that in some cases an *offer* or *sale* is advertised. Other distinguishing features that the adolescents mentioned included that the product was clearly visible and that they are urged to buy the product.

“When prices are quoted and [they] say ‘we are best’ and things like that.”
Boy, age 13.

“They try to get you to do something or buy something.”
Boy, age 15.

The adolescents think it is especially easy to identify an ad on YouTube. This applies only to the advertising films that come before the videos they want to watch. In addition, the advertising videos have a yellow time strip, which they interpret as a sign that it is an ad, since the strip is not on regular videos. One of the boys said he could recognise an ad on Facebook when “advertisement” was written there.

Thus, it is primarily ads that make use of traditional means that the adolescents call ads in the social media, and likewise the ads that came in the advertising fields on websites and on Facebook, which were usually offers and sales of things for which they had searched on the Internet. The advertising films on YouTube were not difficult to recognise as ads either. However, only a few of them spoke of the concept of product placement without being urged to do so, and none of them mentioned content advertising, e.g. ads integrated into the newsfeed on Facebook or the actual videos they watched online.



3.5 Attentive to personalised advertising

The 15-year-olds were also attentive to so-called *cookies*, which enable advertising in the social media to be adapted to each individual. When they have visited a website, e.g. for clothing, they will subsequently get many ads for offers from that shop in the advertising field on Facebook. They thought this was a little disturbing:

“Everywhere I have been before. For instance, if I go to Nelly and then go to Facebook, on the banner at the top there will be things like: 70% off on clothing!”

Girl, age 15.

“Like Facebook. I’ve noticed that. Like in a way they are monitoring us. They see which websites you visit the most. After that you will regularly get ads for the sites you have searched. That is actually good, but at the same time it’s a little bit sinister. Like we are human beings; we only live once.”

Boy, age 15.

The quote above expresses an ambivalence to personalised advertising. On the one hand, it is positive to get good offers for something they like and in which they are interested, but on the other hand, they say that it gives them a feeling of being “monitored”; and indeed they are, but they obviously don’t get this feeling when they are exposed to more entertainment-based ads.

This brings us a step further to take a closer look at how the adolescents perceived ads in the social media when the three designated marketing techniques were used: advertising in which they are urged to act, competitions, and the use of role models whom they admire.



4 Advertising as an exhortation to action

There are many examples of ads in the social media that aim to engage the target group and get them to actively do something. This is not least very common on Facebook. Producers and branded products are after everything from getting a *like* (thumbs up) to persuading the recipients to solve specific problems and challenges, to which they post an answer.



EXHORTATION TO ACTIVELY DO SOMETHING

This method is used to get the target group to do something actively in the media where the marketing occurs. It may be:

- directly or indirectly requesting a reaction, such as a like, posting a heart or using other emojis,
- directly or indirectly requesting that you tag friends,
- getting the target group to solve a funny challenge or task,
- making some other form of comment.

We showed the participants four different screen dumps taken from the Facebook sites of McDonald's, Pepsi Max, Tine Ice Tea and Coca-Cola.





Pic. 1: Examples of entries on Facebook from producers of branded products, which urge the target group to do something actively, such as giving a like, an emoji or a comment.



Pic. 2: Examples of entries on Facebook from beverage producers where they objectively want to engage you with amusing problems that must be solved and thereby obtain likes, comments and further dissemination.

These are examples of entries that are posted as a status update on the Facebook-sites of the various producers of branded products, and which will pop up in the newsfeed of those who follow them. The entries were accompanied by a text that urged *liking*, offering reactions and commenting. Tine Ice Tea and Coca-Cola posted problems to which they wanted to get a response. In order to get the adolescents' response to these examples, the moderator asked an open question: "What do you think when you see this?"

The adolescents referred to these examples as ads. Many of them had seen them on their own Facebook profile, but only one of the participants followed any of the brands that were behind these ads. One of the 15-year-old girls followed Coca-Cola on Facebook. The others had also got these ads in their newsfeed, even though they did not follow the brands.



4.1 Become engaged by amusing challenges

What the participants found amusing and engaging varied from person to person. In general it turned out that if the entry contained an amusing challenge or problem that did not take too long to perform or solve, there were many who responded that they might give it a try.

"I have seen it [Tine Ice Tea]. It is amusing. They have used a little mathematics here. I did the calculation, but I didn't comment on it. I just scrolled on down."

Boy, age 15.

"I did it! – it popped up on my screen. It was fun. I did it because it is fun doing things like that."

Girl, age 15.

In the example from Tine Ice Tea, they were supposed to solve an arithmetic problem involving Ice Tea bottles, and many thought this was fun, provided they liked math. Many may have taken the time to do this calculation, but they would not necessarily have *given it a like* or responded in the comment felt. The same applied to Coca-Cola's puzzle challenge, where they were supposed to put the pieces of the puzzle in the right place. Many of them regarded this as fun.

If, on the other hand, they thought that the ad missed the mark; e.g. through an unsuccessful attempt at humour or because the picture exaggerated too much, it was less likely that they would *give it a like*.

"They are lying! The burger you get is like completely smashed down. It doesn't look anything like this. It may tempt people who haven't gone to McDonald's very much. It doesn't tempt me, because that's not what you get from them."

Boy, age 13

Thus, for the suppliers of branded products, this type of involvement with the adolescents is also a risky game – there is a hairline balance between advertising stunts that are perceived as amusing and those that merely flop. However, they get good information about this by following the target group's engagement and activities in the social media.

4.2 Hit the *like* button on autopilot

"It is a habit, if you click that you like things [a product] then you may get likes back, but when they are so big with over 1 million followers it is not like they are going to like back, but it is a habit."

Girl, age 13.

"You also see on Facebook when somebody does it, so then it spreads fast."

Girl, age 15.



"I think they only want to get likes, for then they are recognised. The more likes they get, the more the post is seen."
Boy, age 13.

For most of the respondents, it seemed as if *liking* is a habit, something that they do on autopilot, especially if they like the product, and most of them are aware that by *liking* something they are helping spread the advertisement. Only a couple of the 13-year-old boys said that they refrained from *liking* things like this because they did not want to take part in spreading the ad. When they were asked why the producers post this type of ad on Facebook, the adolescents agreed that it was in order to get *likes* and to spread the ad. Despite this, the impression was that the threshold for *liking* was low, whereas it was somewhat higher for *tagging* or commenting.

4.3 Branded products become part of adolescents' social networks

"If, for example, Tyra is fond of Pepsi Max, then I could have tagged her for this. It is to show that 'Hey, when I see Pepsi Max, I think of you!' or 'We could have done this together!'"
Girl, age 15.

If they like the product, it is often enough for them to *like* a post on the branded product's Facebook-page. If it is also done humorously and they get associations, for example, to friends, there is an even greater chance that they will *like* it and maybe even *tag* others. When the branded products succeed in getting involved in the adolescents' social network, the product can be associated with something and someone they like – not just by one, but by many. In a way, the branded product is invited into a circle of friends, becomes one of the things the adolescents talk about and a means to maintain and build relations with one's peers. It becomes a form of digital word of mouth and peer-to-peer marketing.

The concept of *indirect advertising* often designates advertising that is disseminated through intermediaries, but one of the 13-year-old girls used it as a designation for producers' posting of activities and challenges on Facebook. The following was said about Coca-Cola's dynamic puzzle of a coke bottle, which you were supposed to try to plug by putting all of the pieces in the right place:

"It is often things like this that you would like to try out. And like trying to stop the picture at the right time – in a way it's an ad for Coca-Cola, if coke does something like this – you don't think about it there and then, but it is also indirect advertising."
Girl, age 13.

The ad is referred to as indirect because it is not designed and presented in a way that makes it clear that it is an ad. At the moment when it is seen, there and then, people do not think of it as an ad.



When producers link branded goods or branded products with a completely different activity, it can distract attention from the fact that it is an ad. We also saw this in the example where Coca-Cola posted a competition on Facebook where you could win two day passes at Norway's most popular skiing facility if you *tagged* a friend and told him/her why you ought to win. This marketing was regarded by many as first and foremost an ad for the skiing facility.

"Coca-Cola gets us to tell it to friends. In a way, it doesn't matter whether you like coke or not if you like to ski."

Girl, age 15.



5 Advertising as inspiring competitions

Competitions are effective marketing techniques that are used by many producers of branded products on Facebook and other social media. Many of the adolescents had taken part in different competitions on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. When competitions are used for the purpose of marketing, various methods are often combined, but user-generated content is an essential method.

We included examples of competitions from Tine Litago, Burger King, Coca-Cola and Tine Ice Tea.



COMPETITIONS WITH ENTICING PRIZES

- Competitions are used to entice the target group to actively do one or more things in the media where the marketing occurs, with the possibility that they may receive something in return.
- The target group often contributes its own content so as to thereby create a user-generated ad, which means that they are no longer only consumers, but rather a combination of producer and consumer.
- People are tempted with prizes of various sorts, but the complete terms and conditions for participating are rarely specified.
- An age limit for participating in a contest is rarely specified.

5.1 Competitions as user-generated advertising

In February 2017, Tine Litago held a competition on Snapchat and Facebook where followers were urged to take a picture of a Litago carton, draw on the cow on Snapchat, and then submit the picture. Neither the terms and conditions for participating, nor the prize to the winner were specified anywhere, aside from promising that it would bring “honour and glory”. After the competition got under way, and the pictures were submitted to Snapchat, the drawings were posted as examples on Facebook. These were given both *likes* and comments. Some people also drew a costume on the Litago cow and posted it in the comments field.





Pic. 3: Create your own Litago. In February 2017, Tine Litago launched a competition on Snapchat and Facebook where they invited followers to draw a carnival costume on the Litago cow.

The 15-year-old boys thought taking part in this competition was boring and took too much time, whereas the 15-year-old girls thought it looked like fun.

"I simply can't be bothered. The prize isn't big enough, and it is boring."

Boy, age 15.

"It is kind of fun. You have to be creative."

Girl, age 15.

From the activity on Litago's Facebook site, we can see that there was considerable engagement. This form of user-generated marketing is an extremely potent method of marketing to children and adolescents through the social media. It can give them a positive feeling to have their creativity displayed to a larger audience and to maybe even be selected as a winner. One of the 13-year-old girls thought that by taking part in



this kind of competition held by Tine Litago, she would be helping Tine to advertise for Litago.

"They make you do advertising for them. You are working for free. That's not cool!"
Girl, age 13.

Another example of a competition that is based on user-generated advertising is Tine Ice Tea Bottle flip, with which many of the adolescents were familiar. This competition, which Tine Ice Tea held in the summer of 2016, entailed sending in a film of yourself or friends, where you perform *tricks flipping* Tine Ice Tea *bottles*. The film that we showed to adolescents consisted of some of the winning videos. In most cases, the adolescents thought this was cool and amusing, even though the trend was a little passé. The film was entertaining, but it also became clear that they regarded this as advertising and product placement. One of the 13-year-old boys thought that not everyone who sees this film will understand that it is an ad.

"It is an ad and like it is entertainment. Because you want it more if it is also entertainment"
Girl, age 13.

"They are trying to become more popular with children."
Boy, age 13.

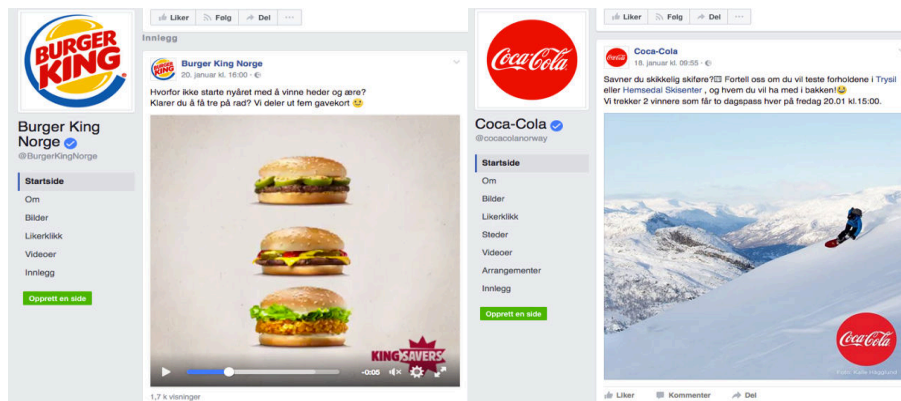
The two marketing examples from Tine are in many ways different and probably also have different effects on different target groups. One feature they have in common is that they are engaging because the participants are challenged; they are given an opportunity to use their creativity, to actively contribute content themselves, and they may be able to show off their abilities and entertain others in their adolescent peer group. Prizes in the form of honour and glory prove to be incentive enough. The quotes above also show that the adolescents want to try the products that are advertised if they think that the ads are entertaining.

5.2 Tempting prizes with little actual value

Nevertheless, it was a general impression that the prize was of fairly large importance in determining whether the adolescents we spoke with would take part in competitions. The prize could be big or small, preferably big, but the most important thing was that they liked the product or could use the prize. For example, it might be a gift voucher or a trip, or they might be able to win a certain amount of the actual product. The number of people who were already taking part in the competitions was also a significant factor in determining whether the adolescents would take part because it affected their chances of winning. Moreover, it was important that it did not demand too much of them to take part and that it would not take too much of their time.



"If they have 2 million followers, there is not any chance of winning anything. Yesterday, I actually took part in a competition. It was a 100 kroner gift voucher at Bislett kebab – all you needed to do was to comment with a heart emoji, and so I decided that it could do no harm, and only 200 people had taken part – a much greater chance of winning."
 Boy, age 15.



Pic. 4: Small prizes may seem attractive and entice adolescents to get involved in marketing in the social media.

In the same way as the puzzle by Coca-Cola, the Burger King competition involved stopping the video at the right time. Various types of burgers moved across the screen, and the point was to stop the video when you had three of the same burgers in a row. This was regarded as a low threshold competition in which many said they could participate. The prize was a gift voucher at Burger King.

"I think most people would take part because then they get something extra good to look forward to."
 Boy, age 13.

In the competition from Coca-Cola on Facebook, you could win two day passes to a skiing facility in the Norwegian resorts of Trysil or Hemsedal. In order to take part, you had to tag a friend and tell "whether you wanted to test the skiing conditions in Trysil or Hemsedal." Many of the adolescents thought it was a good prize, it sounded like fun, and it did not demand very much to take part.

"I think it looks like fun because I like to ski, so I would certainly have tried it."
 Girl, age 15.
"It makes them look very generous. Seems very nice."
 Boy, age 13.



Marketing disguised as competitions works very effectively on adolescents, especially when they are tempted with “good” prizes. The examples we had found varied in their nature, and there was variation as to whether the adolescents with whom we spoke would have taken the time to participate. If the prize is regarded as valuable by the adolescents, the chance of their participating increases. Coca-Cola’s competition where you could win two day passes to an alpine skiing facility, was regarded as a good prize, but had a total value of less than 1000 kroner (about \$110). At Burger King you could win a gift voucher, but the value was not even stated, nor did the Litago competition specify the prize. Many respondents remembered the competition held by Freia in December 2016, where you could win a visit to the chocolate factory by building a house out of milk chocolate.

Through competitions, producers of branded products are often perceived as generous; they build their brand name and build relations – a value that comes in addition to the effect that the marketing has on sales and turnover. When we consider the actual value of the prizes, their cost is extremely low compared with the value of the effect of the competition.

5.3 Competitions with indirect exhortations to purchase

Another method of building a brand and achieving increased sales is to arrange the competition so that the product must be purchased in order for someone to take part. Many producers use competitions as an aspect of their commercial communication in the social media, and in some competitions it is an implicit necessity that the product must be purchased in order for someone to take part. Direct exhortations to purchase aimed at children are forbidden⁷. If participation in a competition requires the purchase of a product and direct exhortations to purchase aimed at children are posted, that would be illegal.

In the above-mentioned Tine Ice Tea *bottle-flip* competition, the product must necessarily be purchased in order to be able to take part. In the other above-mentioned competition held by Tine Litago on Snapchat and Facebook, you have to take a picture of the product before you can draw anything on it and submit it via social media platforms.

⁷ Pursuant to Section 20, paragraph two of the Norwegian Marketing Control Act, cf. Section 1, sub-section 28 of the Norwegian regulations concerning unfair commercial practices (the black list).





Pic. 5: Example of user-generated advertising. Via social media platforms, Tine Ice Tea invited children and adolescents to send in a film of themselves or friends doing tricks flipping Ice Tea bottles.

Some of the adolescents were critical to this type of binding; e.g. that they had to subscribe (YouTube), follow a YouTuber, or buy the product in order to take part in various competitions.

"You have to buy [the product]." ...in order to take part. "That is also how they make money."

Girl, age 13.

"Ice Tea did the same thing! You had to buy a bottle; then you could win a GoPro."

Boy, age 13.

"You had to have an Ice Tea bottle in order to do it. First buy Ice Tea, then do it."

Girl, age 15.

In the YouTube-film of Makeup Malin, which we will discuss in the next chapter of this report, Malin urges her followers to buy a package of Oreos and take part in the competition, where they could win a trip to New York. The terms and conditions for the competition were not stated.

Advertisements for food and beverages aimed at children rarely contain direct exhortations to purchase anything because that is forbidden by law. A relevant question is whether indirect exhortations to purchase, such as those that are often inherent in competitions, are more acceptable than direct exhortations to purchase. The adolescents themselves did not think so.



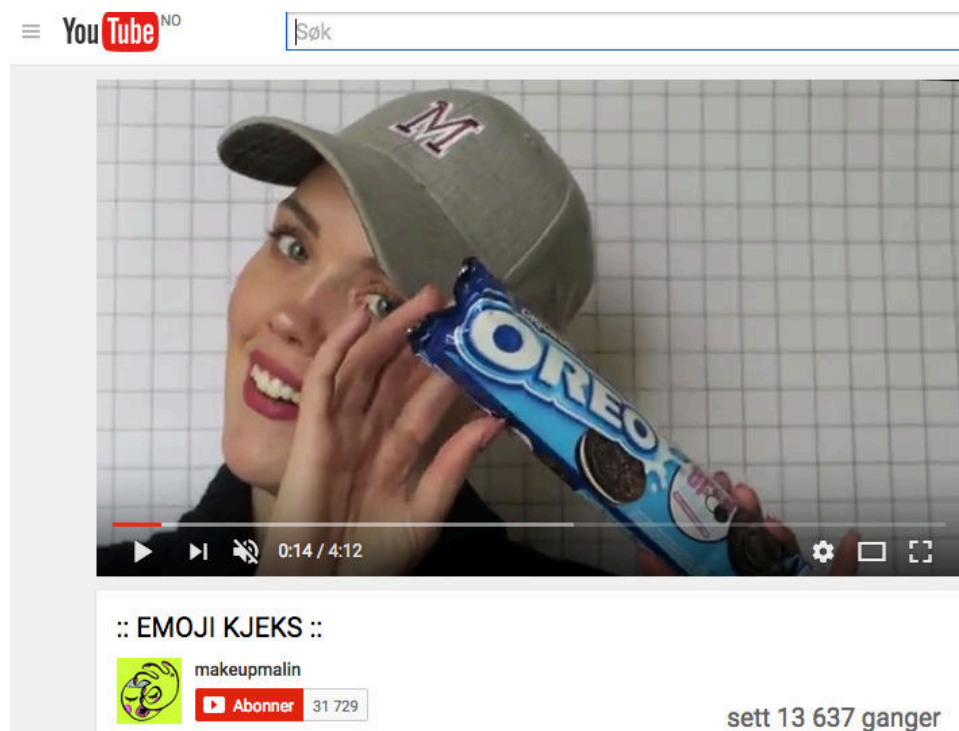
6 Advertising conveyed by influential persons

The last marketing technique to which we wanted to study the adolescents' relationship was advertising disseminated by YouTubers and athletes, who are examples of persons with influence on and appeal to adolescents.

When persons receive payment or other benefits for promoting and disseminating information about products in the social media for the purpose of increasing sales of the product, that is also defined as advertising. It should be made clear and evident to the followers of a YouTuber when a video contains an ad and when it has no commercial content, but we discovered that adolescents do not always perceive this distinction.

In this part of the discussion, we chose to show the participants YouTube clips taken from two popular YouTubers. The girls were shown a film with Norwegian Makeup Malin, whereas the boys were shown a clip with the American Wolfieraps. In addition, we chose the young Norwegian snowboarder Markus Kleveland (dob. 1999) as an example of a sponsored athlete.

6.1 Not regarded as an ad because it is "voluntary"



Pic. 6: The well-known YouTuber, Makeup Malin, promotes Oreo cookies in one of her videos on YouTube.



None of the girls in the focus groups followed Makeup Malin, but they knew very well who she was, and especially the 15-year-olds liked her. She has over 31,000 subscribers or followers on YouTube. The clip, which has been shown more than 13,000 times, showed Makeup Malin holding a package of Oreos in her hand as she described a competition that Oreo had launched at that time (April 2016). She speaks warmly about the product, urges everyone to buy a package and says that she herself will take part in the competition. By way of introduction, she says that she has a collaboration with Oreo, but beyond that the film is not labelled as an advertisement. Not everyone understood that this was an ad in the sense that the YouTuber has a commercial collaboration with Oreo.

"She doesn't come right out and say that Oreos are good."

Girl, age 15.

"In a way, she likes them herself, yeah, Oreos, so it's not like she gets money for showing them. She likes Oreos; that's why she's doing it."

Girl, age 15.

One of the girls used the concept of "voluntary advertising" to describe the form of advertising where the YouTuber speaks warmly about a product, completely voluntarily.

"A paid advertisement is where you may not use the product yourself, but you have to accentuate its good sides."

Girl, age 13.

"Sometimes they are not sponsored either; then it is a voluntary ad. For instance, if you think the product is very good and want to spread the word about it."

Girl, age 13.

When the girls use the concept of *voluntary advertising* to describe this type of product promotion, it indicates that they have not understood that it is a paid advertisement. They think there can be different reasons why video bloggers say positive things about individual products: sometimes they are paid to do so, but not always. Because Makeup Malin says what she says about Oreo cookies; i.e. that they are her favourites, what she says is perceived to be *voluntary advertising*. Her credibility and personality clearly weigh heavier than the information that she is collaborating with the producer. Since they do not have the ability to distinguish between the one and the other type of advertising, they do not know when they are being exposed to actual marketing, but in this specific case it is not easy either to understand that a commercial collaboration lies behind the clip. This is in keeping with what the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation's Brennpunkt programme "The YouTube generation" showed when it was aired in the autumn of 2016; i.e. that children and adolescents who follow YouTubers do not always understand when they are being exposed to paid advertising and commercial marketing⁸.

⁸ <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/brennpunkt/mddp11001116/11-10-2016>



6.2 Labelling of commercial content must be made clear

“YouTubers admit that they are sponsored, but they usually don’t talk about it very much.”
Girl, age 13.

As mentioned, it should be made clearly evident when a film in the social media includes advertising. Interesting questions in this context are how it must be labelled so that it is actually perceived as an ad, and how the target group’s relationship to the YouTuber affects its perception of the labelling. Even though it was stated in the film of Makeup Malin that it was based on a collaboration with the producer, it turned out that not everyone regarded it as a paid ad. Some of the girls thought that Makeup Malin’s film was entertainment, and they thought that it did not contain any advertising because the YouTuber speaks personally.

“Not advertising. I feel she does it like a little personally since she is going to try them herself.”
Girl, age 15.
“You almost don’t notice it [that it is an ad], because you like the person so much.”
Girl, age 13.

Thus, it seems as if the recipient’s relationship to the person who speaks warmly about a product can influence the way in which he or she interprets the film in its entirety. If they initially have a positive attitude to the YouTuber, it is probably not as easy to perceive that the product placement is an ad. The YouTuber’s message is regarded as genuine and free of any influence, and that makes it very effective, regardless of whether or not the video has been labelled as an ad. In order to “stifle” the effect that the YouTuber has by virtue of him- or herself, especially on adolescents, the requirements for clear labelling must be stricter.

There are many ways to label a product. In the example that the girls were shown of the Oreos, it would seem that the YouTuber chooses her words in a way that makes it difficult for the target group to understand that they are being exposed to an ad. In Great Britain, a judgment was made against Oreo in 2014 for a campaign where they used video bloggers to promote their products and did not make it clear to the consumers that it was an ad⁹.

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/nov/26/youtube-ad-oreo-banned-advertising-lick-race>



6.3 Effective to combine entertainment with marketing

The clip that we showed the boys was an American YouTuber called Wolfieraps, who has over five million followers, while he talked about making *Instant Coca-Cola ice*. On the table in front of Wolfieraps you clearly see several bottles of Coca-Cola. In the corner of the video, it reads “Can we reach 100,000 likes?!”

The 13-year-old boys did not see very much entertainment value in the YouTuber we had chosen. Among other things, they thought that it was *cringey*¹⁰, i.e. embarrassing, and that he used many *click baits*, since he asked his followers to *like* the film right at the beginning of the clip.

“Cringey – that it is like awkward, strange. – because he shouts an awful lot, and then he overreacts too much.”

Boy, age 13.

“In a way, it is a trap. He gets money for it.”

Boy, age 13.

The older boys found him amusing, and most of them laughed when they watched the clip. It was obvious that they thought this was mainly entertainment, interspersed with an ad. This, we know, is a clear trend. Ads have become entertainment, and that makes them more effective.

“Entertainment and ads, most YouTubers have agreements like: Can you advertise for us? If so, we will sponsor you. That is like a win-win situation.”

Boy, age 15.

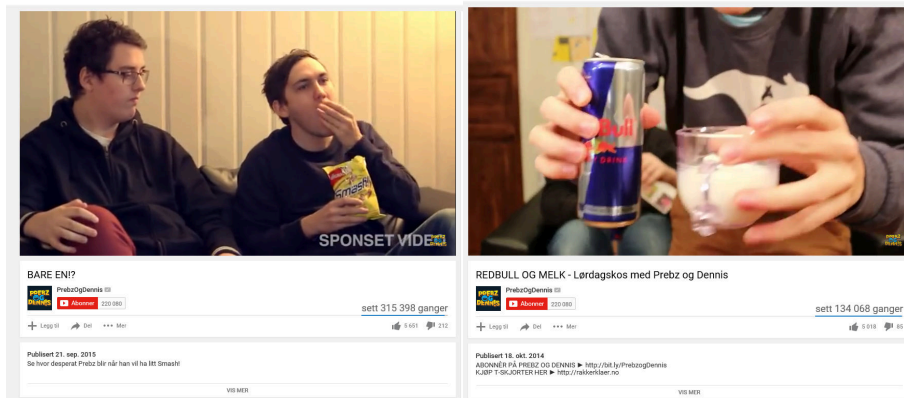
“It is just nonsense and okay and amusing.”

Boy, age 15.

Prebz and Dennis are an example of two Norwegian YouTubers who have over 200,000 followers, many of whom are children as young as ages 9–10. They have collaborated with producers of beverages and chocolate (Nidar Smash, Solo and Freia milk chocolate) in their videos.

¹⁰ Cringey - embarrassing or making [you] feel uncomfortable.
www.urbandictionary.com





Pic. 7: The YouTubers Prebz and Dennis have many examples of content advertising and product placement in their films.

Prebz and Dennis Lørdagskos is a concept where they ask to be sent challenges to drink or eat strange blends of various products. The products are clearly displayed, but for the viewers it is difficult to know when the products are promoted commercially. Combining entertainment and marketing is beneficial to both bloggers and producers. Even though adolescents say that they can spot the ads in a film on YouTube, it turns out when they are asked, however, that they find it difficult to perceive that they are being exposed to commercial influence when the entertainment and marketing are woven so closely together.

"In a way, they are secret messages. You see the brand many times, and then you go out to a store, and you think, 'Oh, maybe I should try a red bull. You do it without thinking about it."

Boy, age 13.



7 Summary and thoughts for the road ahead

7.1 Marketing in the social media goes under the radar

Norwegian children and adolescents are major consumers of social media and other activities on the Internet. Social media have become important channels for commercial marketing, not least for food and beverage producers. The adolescents in our study think there are generally a lot of advertising in the social media, and they are regularly exposed to advertising of unhealthy products, such as soda pop and other sweet beverages, sweets and various types of fast food.

In the beginning of the focus groups, the adolescents spoke openly about online advertising, and the examples they mentioned were first and foremost ads that can be defined as traditional advertising given the ways in which they are designed. These are forms of advertising that they know how to recognise, and it is this type of marketing that they think of first when they are asked to tell what kind of ads they are exposed to on the Internet and in the social media. None of the adolescents mentioned on their own accord ads that turned up as status updates from producers of branded products in the newsfeed on Facebook, nor did it occur to them that content advertising in videos on YouTube were a form of advertising to which they were exposed.

The distinguishing features that the adolescents used to distinguish ads from other content were typically traditional aspects, such as that the price was stated, that something was for sale, that you clearly saw the product and that you were urged to buy it. Marketing in social media uses other and far more sophisticated methods than these, which means that the ads are less clearly perceived as advertising.

Marketing in social media is targeted, effective in its ability to influence and makes use of sophisticated methods to engage and affect. When that is coupled with user-generated content and prizes that can be won, is mixed with humour and is communicated by persons with a strong appeal, the ads no longer seem like advertising, but as entertainment. It is difficult for adolescents to detect and perceive this as marketing. Since it is entertaining, adolescents regard the subtle ad as something positive. They are influenced without being fully aware of it. In order to counteract marketing's influence, the adolescents must not only understand its intent to persuade, but also be aware of it, and not least have the ability and the motivation to resist.

Marketing in social media is perceived as indirect, and according to the adolescents themselves, they let themselves be influenced. Humour was said to be an important factor influencing the ways in which they relate to the ad. Whether the marketing or the YouTuber was regarded as amusing was crucial to whether the adolescents let themselves be engaged in the social media.

The adolescents used different terms to designate different forms of marketing. With the concepts of "indirect advertising", "voluntary advertising" and "secret messages", the adolescents emphasise the subtle aspects of the marketing to which they are exposed in the social media and the ways in which it affects their subconscious.



Since the amount of information in and the speed of the social media are so enormous, it is easy to think that the individual product placement, the individual entry on Facebook, an amusing competition and an entertaining video cannot have very much importance. Yet it is the total marketing pressure that is crucial, and even if each of the glimpses of a product or a logo is so brief that it can scarcely be perceived, there may be a cumulative effect. This is subliminal perception of information, which means that pictures that are shown so briefly that they lie below the threshold of normal conscious perception nevertheless can have an influence on experiences, attitudes and behaviour. The adolescents feel that even though they do not stop or do something actively when they are exposed to advertising in the social media, they believe that a branded good or a product lodges itself in their subconscious and can influence what they desire when they are out with friends.

"It is actually distracting, you know. When you do the [Coca-Cola] puzzle, you only think about coke. When you get something in your head, then it is not so easy to get it back out."

Boy, age 15.

"I notice during the week in a way that I want to do it. On the weekend or sometime [to go to McDonald's]. But if I see it [the ad] there and then, I never go to McDonald's."

Girl, age 15.

"You feel thirsty after having seen those coke or Fanta ads."

Boy, age 13.

"And the one where the wall turned into chocolate and you could reach into the wall and then it became Smash! I wanted Smash really bad when I saw that ad."

Girl, age 15.

Adolescents have a tendency to underestimate their own vulnerability to marketing, but in the case of the subtle marketing in social media, it is clear that they themselves think they are exposed to its influence. They realise that many of the food and beverage advertisements to which they are exposed go beneath their radar when the ad appears to be something completely different from what it actually is.

7.2 A need for better protection of adolescents against unhealthy marketing

In this report, we have studied adolescents' perception of the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages in social media and their vulnerability to the effects of this marketing. We think there are good grounds for arguing that they are not sufficiently protected against this kind of marketing despite the law that requires a special protection of minors and the precautionary rules that the food industry has imposed upon itself.



The law specifies that commercial entities shall give special consideration when the marketing is directly aimed at or can be seen or heard by children¹¹. This applies even if the ad is meant for adults. In Norway, the food industry has specified that it is children up to and including age 12 who shall be protected, although caution shall also be shown with regard to adolescents. The age limit of 12 was set when The Norwegian Food and Drink Industry Professional Practices Committee was established, despite the fact that the Ministry of Health and Care Services' proposed regulations recommended that the age limit be set at 15¹². The World Health Organisation (WHO) thinks that all children must be protected, but if an age limit shall be set, it ought to be age 16 so as to protect the most vulnerable adolescents.

In the European self-regulation scheme, EU Pledge¹³, children are defined as children up to age 12. The background for this age limit, which is used in many countries throughout the world, is probably research that was done in the 1960s. That research showed that children at that age had developed rational and cognitive abilities that made them capable of understanding what was an ad. At that age, they could distinguish ads from other content, and would thereby be more capable of protecting themselves against advertising. Since then, much research has been done on the effects of marketing, and it is important to emphasise that marketing itself has changed dramatically.

More recent research in psychology, neurology and behavioural research shows that an age-based approach – the fact that children become more resistant to the effects of advertising with each additional year that they age – is not sufficient (16). The WHO has also questioned whether age is a suitable approach for determining when a person is no longer vulnerable to influences from commercial entities, especially in light of the transition to more digital marketing. At present, highly sophisticated methods and techniques are employed to influence adolescents, who are in a vulnerable phase of their life. Even with an understanding of advertising's intentions to persuade and a well-developed scepticism to marketing, it still has an effect on adolescents' preferences and behaviour.

The EU has recently set a higher legal age limit of 16 for consent to gather and handle personal data in the EU General Data Protection Regulation, passed in April 2016, which will replace the current EU Data Protection Directive by 2018. The member nations are allowed to specify a lower age limit as long as it is not below 13.

In order to achieve the goal of limiting children and adolescents' exposure to the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages, there must be agreement about who has the right to protection. All persons under age 18 are legally defined as minors¹⁴, and the Norwegian Marketing Control Act states that all minors are vulnerable. The younger the children that are exposed to marketing, the stricter this assessment will be. Children and adolescents are defined as a vulnerable consumer group, among other things, because of their age and their lack of experience and critical ability. Minors have greater

¹¹ Cf. Section 19, paragraph one of the Marketing Control Act.

¹² In the first proposal for regulations that was submitted for a consultative round, the age limit was set at 18.

¹³ <http://www.eu-pledge.eu/>

¹⁴ Cf. Article 1 of the UN Convention on The Rights of The Child.



difficulty understanding what marketing is and are less proficient than adults at recognising marketing and distinguishing it from other forms of communication.

Commercial entities shall take children's susceptibility, lack of experience and natural credulity into consideration, and show consideration for their age, development and other methods that make children especially vulnerable. Also in cases where the marketing is *not* particularly aimed at children, emphasis shall be given to whether it is likely to affect children and whether the commercial entity can be expected to foresee children's particular vulnerability. In the assessment of whether a marketing practice aimed at children is unfair, emphasis shall be given to methods such as the target group's age and development¹⁵. It is also specified in the MFU's guidelines that for marketing aimed at children, their age and development shall be taken into consideration.

Commercial entities that use the social media for marketing must be especially attentive to whether it has been made clearly evident at all times when the recipients are exposed to marketing. They must be especially careful when the target group consists of persons under the age of 18. Marketing in the social media to younger children must be assessed differently than marketing to 15–16-year-old adolescents¹⁶. A number of requirements have been specified for marketing to children and adolescents in the social media, which include the advertisement's form and content, the type of product, and whether they are directly urged to buy it.

Among the adolescents with whom we talked, some of the 13-year-olds were more sceptical and critical to advertising in the social media than some of the 15-year-olds. In other words, it is not necessarily the case that the way in which adolescents relate to marketing in the social media has a linear relationship with their age. As a result of social, physiological and psychological factors, adolescents are in a vulnerable phase of their life.

In Great Britain, the Committee on Advertising Practice (CAP) has approved new guidelines that will come into force in July 2017. A significant change is that the age group that shall be protected has been changed; whereas it was previously children up to the age of 12, it is now children and adolescents up to age 16 who are to be protected (17). The arguments for this tightening of the guidelines are consistent with factors pointed out in this study, such as adolescents' vulnerability with regard to exposure to the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages, their independence when it comes to deciding their own consumption and their digital media habits.

¹⁵ <https://forbrukerombudet.no/lov-og-rett/veiledninger-og-retningslinjer/forbrukerombudets-veiledning-handelspraksis-overfor-barn-unge>

¹⁶ The Position of the Nordic Consumer Ombudsmen on social media marketing of 3 May 2012. <https://forbrukerombudet.no/content/2012/04/Felles-nordisk-standpunkt-om-markedsforing-via-sosiale-medier.pdf>



7.3 A need for measures to prevent marketing aimed at children and adolescents in the social media

Marketing in the social media makes use of a number of sophisticated methods that have considerable influence on the ways in which adolescents relate to the advertising to which they are exposed. They are engaged, entertained and tempted with prizes, and they become the actual driving force in the marketing.

The activities and reactions of adolescents in the social media give advertisers valuable information. By analyzing the ways in which the target groups get involved, what they do, and how they comment, the producers obtain increasingly precise information about what appeals to the adolescents and what characterises those who get involved in the various activities. This information is then further used to develop even more effective and targeted ads in the social media.

MFU's self-regulation does not exclude marketing in the social media, but neither the tools, the media, nor the age limit are defined in such a way that adolescents are sufficiently protected. In its evaluation of MFU, the Norwegian Directorate of Health also calls for a discussion of the ways in which the food industry will meet the challenges inherent in the marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to children and adolescents through the social media (18).

It is possible to envision several different measures to better protect adolescents, where regulation of the media is just as relevant as ensuring stricter regulation of the food industry's marketing practices for unhealthy food and beverages. It must be possible to regard advertisements that are spread with *likes*, commenting and *tagging* in social media as unsolicited communication and something that persons have not consented to receive in their digital newsfeed. On Facebook, there is no possibility of turning off the ads or renouncing unsolicited advertising.

Instead of limiting the possibilities for targeted ads aimed at children and adolescents, Facebook's help pages explain to parents that it is the guardian's responsibility to go through the child's advertising settings and turn off the function that puts the child's name and picture in advertisements in the Facebook profiles of others. Together with the leak about Facebook's methods for utilising sensitive information about young users in the development of more targeted marketing aimed at them¹⁷, this gives an indication that the protection of minors is not high on their list of priorities. On the basis of the protection of children and adolescents' privacy and the rights that children and adolescents have by virtue of being minors (cf. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), restrictions on the media ought to be an obvious alternative. The social media can be required to introduce better protection against targeted commercial content for those who are under a certain age.

In the revision of the EU's Directive on Unfair Commercial Practices, the European consumer organisation BEUC has recommended including Internet marketing of unhealthy food and beverages aimed at children on the list of unfair commercial practice (the blacklist).

¹⁷ <http://www.aftenposten.no/digital/Forbrukerradet-hardt-ut-i-ferskt-brev--Facebook-utnyttar-sarbare-ungdommer-10145b.html>



In the above-mentioned revised guidelines from CAP in Great Britain, it is very interesting to note that, in addition to the introduction of a higher age limit, they have introduced stricter regulation of marketing in the non-broadcast media, such as web-based services. The new guidelines forbid the advertising of unhealthy products in all media that are targeted or appeal to children under the age of 16. It will also be forbidden to advertise for unhealthy products in other media where children constitute a significant proportion of the audience and to advertise for branded products, where that includes brand building, e.g. with company logos or licensed media characters, when that has the objective of promoting specific products, even if they are not shown directly. These bans will apply to all media, including advertising on web-based platforms such as social network services.

Children and adolescents have a right and ought to be encouraged to be active and participate on digital platforms and in the social media. That entails the right they have to information and the right to express their opinion. However, participation and engagement must *not* entail being exposed to large numbers of ads for unhealthy food and beverages, which encounter the adolescents where they are most vulnerable through the use of subtle and effective techniques, and which counteract the possibility that adolescents have of developing good, healthy nutritional habits that will promote their good health throughout their whole life. When the current regulations and the industry's self-regulation scheme do not give adolescents adequate protection against undesirable marketing, a specific follow-up must be expected from both the authorities and the food industry.



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