

YouTube's child viewers may struggle to recognise adverts in videos from 'virtual play dates'

March 28 2019, by Rebecca Mardon



Ryan, the star of YouTube channel Ryan ToysReview, shows off his own brand merchandise. Credit: [Ryan ToysReview/YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzplwz9A8kUzE5w5b2k1p3g)

YouTube's highest earning star in 2018 was a seven-year-old boy named Ryan. That's right – a child out-earned the likes of the infamous Logan Paul, video game vlogger PewDiePie, and even make-up mogul Jeffree

Star. Between June 2017 and June 2018, Ryan is estimated to have earned an impressive [US\\$22m from the platform](#).

Guided by his parents, Ryan presents his own YouTube channel, [Ryan ToysReview](#), where he unboxes and plays with the latest toys. Since joining YouTube in 2015, Ryan has amassed more than 18.5m subscribers, the majority of whom are, unsurprisingly, children. Discussing the appeal, [Ryan's mother explained](#) that viewers feel like they're "on a play date with him and going on fun, pretend play adventures".

As child vloggers have risen in fame and fortune, more and more content has been targeted at young viewers, and in 2015 YouTube released [a specific children's platform](#). However, little consideration has been given to the impact of these kinds of videos on child fans, and in particular how they perceive the embedded advertising often included in them.

Advertising literacy

Ryan's channel has become a lucrative business, complete with [25 employees](#), including [video](#) editors, writers and production assistants. It achieved initial commercial success by allowing more traditional "pre-roll" adverts to appear before its videos, which mostly saw Ryan playing with toys – [which his parents say they buy](#). The channel later began to embed advertising content for major brands, such as Walmart, within Ryan's own videos. More recently, the business launched a range of [Ryan's World toys](#) that often feature in his video content.

Ryan's videos do include what seem like [clear, child-friendly disclosures](#) surrounding sponsored content. But the question is whether children actually recognise these disclosures and understand what advertising is, and whether all YouTube videos aimed at children adequately disclose marketing messages.

Research shows that children have lower advertising literacy than adult viewers. They struggle to recognise adverts [when they are embedded](#) in organic content, and may not recognise YouTube videos featuring paid advertising content, vloggers' own-brand merchandise, or free products "gifted" by brands as marketing.

Children are particularly likely to struggle to identify advertising messages by their favourite vloggers. Viewers often come to feel personal attachments to YouTube stars. Fans of beauty vlogger Zoella, for instance, [see her as a sister or best friend](#), and my own research has found that fans often [defend and excuse vlogger actions](#) that might otherwise be seen as problematic or unethical as a result of this relationship. Based on this, we can reasonably predict that children may be more likely to perceive their favourite YouTube star as a friend or play date, as opposed to a celebrity endorser or marketer.

Disclosing advertising content

Evidently children need more direct disclosures than adults to identify adverts, but current advertising [disclosure](#) on YouTube is anything but clear. In recent weeks, both the UK government and the Advertising Standards Authority have warned social media stars that they [must make it clear](#) when they are paid to promote products in their videos. [Regulations state that](#) "viewers need to know they are selecting an ad to view before they watch it". The authority encourages the use of labels such as "ad", "advert", "advertising promotion" or "advertising feature" to disclose content containing a paid for marketing message.

Further [guidance from the Competition and Markets Authority](#) requires free or discounted PR gifts and experiences to be disclosed too, since these are now considered to be a form of incentive or payment. Vloggers are also requested to make it clear when they are featuring their own merchandise, and any content promoting their own products is

[considered an advert.](#)

However, these guidelines are open to interpretation, with significant variations in how the disclosures are made. For example, videos featuring gifted products are variously labelled "ad", "gifted", "freebie", or "PR sample". Disclosures are sometimes made verbally, within the video content, but at other times are included only in the description box below the video, which young children rarely – and often cannot – read.

Additionally, advertising regulations are country-specific and highly diverse. Vloggers are only bound by the regulations in the country from which they upload, rather than viewers' locations. This means that Ryan's channel, for example, is only bound by [US regulations](#), despite his global audience.

The result is a complex and inconsistent system of advertising disclosure that many adults, let alone children, are struggling to fully comprehend. Since children learn to recognise adverts by learning methods of identification, exposure to multiple forms of disclosure may make it difficult for them to work out what is and what is not advertising.

There have been no attempts to introduce a disclosure system more tailored to child audiences, and despite regulators' best efforts, it seems that advertising disclosure on YouTube will become foggier before it gets clearer.

Play date or marketer?

More attention should be paid by platforms and global advertising regulators to the disclosure of embedded marketing messages in videos aimed at child viewers. Currently, the responsibility falls largely on caregivers and educators to help children understand how to identify advertising.

One way to help develop childrens' advertising literacy is to regularly point out embedded [advertising](#) messages on platforms such as YouTube, and explain their persuasive intent. [Research has shown](#) this can help children recognise and more critically evaluate embedded marketing messages.

Talking to [children](#) about their favourite vloggers, and explaining that they promote toy products via their YouTube channel in order to earn money, will also sensitise them to the vlogger's role as a marketer, making them more aware and critical of their embedded marketing messages. In the long term, however, YouTube must work with regulators to establish consistent disclosure mechanisms that can be easily identified and understood by their growing [child](#) user base.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: YouTube's child viewers may struggle to recognise adverts in videos from 'virtual play dates' (2019, March 28) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-03-youtube-child-viewers-struggle-recognise.html>

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