

## Advertising in Children's Audiovisual Content on YouTube

### Publicidade no conteúdo audiovisual infantil no YouTube

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#### Abstract:

Advertising on YouTube has taken new forms, where the unboxing of toys has emerged as a new genre. Using a mixed-methods approach, we conduct content and visual analysis of 20 videos that were found un-deliberately by using the keywords of a popular Disney Channel series. The main findings indicate that this type of content is presented as homemade short movies with no apparent advertising intentions; however, these are not produced by ordinary users or with no product placement intentions. Furthermore, these videos are pervasively and systematically linked to non-advertising content for children and do not include any form of warning or regulation. The results aim at provoking a debate on how advertising is taking advantage of this captive audience.

#### Keywords:

YouTube; Advertising; Toy unboxing.

#### Resumo:

A publicidade no YouTube assumiu novas formas, onde o *unboxing* de brinquedos emergiu como um novo gênero. Usando uma abordagem de métodos mistos, realizamos análise visual e de conteúdo de 20 vídeos que foram encontrados aleatoriamente usando as palavras-chave de uma popular série do Disney Channel. As principais conclusões indicam que esse tipo de conteúdo é apresentado como curtas-metragens caseiros sem nenhuma intenção aparente de publicidade; no entanto, eles não são produzidos por usuários comuns ou sem intenções de colocação de produtos. Ademais, esses vídeos são vinculados de forma abrangente e sistemática a conteúdo não publicitário para crianças e não incluem forma alguma de aviso ou regulamentação. Os resultados visam provocar um debate sobre como a publicidade está tirando vantagem desse público cativo.

**Palavras-chave:**

YouTube; Publicidade; *Unboxing* de brinquedos.

**1 The Mediatization of Leisure in Minors**

According to data from the latest Chilean study on uses, opportunities and risks of using of ICTs of the Kids Online project (Cabello & Claro, 2017), 92% of children and adolescents Internet users have a smartphone, 79% have notebook and 51% a desktop computer. Although the report highlights significant differences in technological equipment depending on the socioeconomic class (C1-C2, C3, D-E), of all the analyzed devices, the Smartphone is the one that penetrates more uniformly among all social classes. In addition, almost 9 out of 10 Chilean households have an Internet connection at home; moreover, 50% confirmed to use the network intensively (several times a day, every day).

These recent statistics of technological equipment and access to the network continue to highlight the strong penetration of different types of screens, especially mobile devices, at increasingly younger ages: according to eMarketer (2015), 60% of Latin Americans adolescents received their first mobile phone at the age of 12, when they began to navigate, consume videos, interact with social networks, play and chat through their personal devices.

As a result of this interactive profile, screens are occupying more and more time in the leisure moments of the youngest, which in turn influences their role and attitude towards consumption and advertising. At this age, leisure is “an important and almost central dimension in the life of young people”: 94% consider it to be quite or very important, with values very close to those that they allocate to friendship, studies “or even to training and professional abilities (González-Anleo & González-Blasco, 2010).

The life context of a child is currently defined based on two variables: the lifestyle established by the adults in their life, as already mentioned, and their level of equipment, which is usually high (2010, p.18). In addition to having an overloaded

schedule of extracurricular homework and activities, children are experiencing what the researchers Pérez Alonso-Geta and Sánchez Peris called a “childhood reduction”, “with the early appropriation of models of adult behavior, premature abandonment of playing and early access to the status of buyer of products intended for adults” (2010, p.5).

The distribution of the children’s time when they are not at school depends directly on the availability and work of the parents (Pérez Alonso-Geta & Sánchez Peris, 2010, p.15). The work schedule forces parents to occupy the time of their children with extracurricular activities, which results in an overload of different activities after school hours “and leaves little space for children’s leisure” (2010, p.14). When the children are older, the parents choose to leave them alone at their houses, due to the potential dangers they may suffer in the street and the reduction of the urban spaces of play, thus “the possibilities of autonomous and active leisure decrease and the use of TV, videogames, Internet, etc., often is intensified” (2010, p.15).

Given this context, the space and time of contact with peers are reduced and Pérez Alonso-Geta and Sánchez Peris (2010) predict a change in the children’s play and consumption profile, increasingly away from traditional children’s leisure and closer to new technologies, television or advertising. “We are witnessing [...] a premature aging regarding children’s possibilities of playing, such as early access to adult models and products, due to the time that they are exposed to adult models, through television and other screens, and the little time they spend playing with other children” (Pérez Alonso-Geta & Sánchez Peris, 2010, p.58)

The experts warn of the weight that screens are acquiring in the children’s process of socialization and constitution of reality, influenced increasingly by the messages received through the media.

Various studies (Injuve, FSM) warn of a progressive “mediatization” of leisure for children and young people in a double sense. On the one hand, the aforementioned presence of screens in their lives makes them opt for more sedentary leisure, by abandoning activities such as sports or visits to museums or art exhibitions: “In general, there is an increase in the interest and practice of activities that require little personal effort and can be done with a certain passivity, such as watching television or

movies or using electronic games at home” (Monteagudo, 2007, p.259). On the other hand, information technologies acquire greater importance in their daily interactions, “the mobile phone and the use of the Internet are penetrating more and more” (2007, p.252), and have caused a substantial transformation in the way of conceiving and maintaining their social relations.

## 2 The Child as a Consumer

The advertising market is very interested in minors because of their socially integrated consumer profile, their care for brands and their imitative style (Salgado Carrión, 2006, p.32). Children practice “an instantaneous consumption”: this public is characterized by its little patience, since they do not understand the need to wait, so they want the fulfillment of their desires to be almost immediate. The relationship between brands and children tends to be more faithful as they grow older, because when they are young they tend to focus more on the product than on the brand. The child shapes his role as a consumer by assimilating and coping with the habits of those around him and by appropriating the behaviors of his elders. “Hence, the influence of both parents and school friends and what they perceive through the media [...] is fundamental in their behavior” (Salgado Carrión, 2006, p.33).

The child, in his role as consumer, is defined according to two factors: age and his environment of influence (Ruiz, 2011, p.2). The classification of parental styles of Carlson and Grossbart (1990) explains that, depending on the role played by their parents, the media and friends will have more or less influence on the decisions of their children.

According to McNeal (1992) who proposed five stages of development of the behavior of child as a consumer, the minor –subject of this research– has already passed the observation, request, selection and assisted purchase phases and is in the last step; it is a child who can already acquire goods independently, can make purchases on his own and “also starts to use persuasion strategies to convince his parents” (Ruiz, 2011, p.3) to make purchases that involve a certain expenditure. “The

need to build their own identity arises, instrumentalizing consumption to that end. Consumption is subordinated to identity and affective affinities with those products that can project their entity and reinterpret it properly” (Pérez Alonso-Geta & Sánchez Peris, 2010, p.5).

The minor is of great interest for the market and for the advertising sector because it represents, at the same time, three types of market: primary, future and of influence (McNeal, 1992). The first market refers to all the goods and services that children acquire directly with their own money, usually small quantities. They normally acquire products such as trinkets, stickers, comics, ice creams... “that make them, despite their young age, real customers for certain sectors” (Ruiz, 2011, p.1). The future market is the one for which “they acquire certain knowledge and attitudes about brands and products that are not yet within their reach” (Bringué, 2001, p.1) to become the buyers of tomorrow; finally, there is the market of influence, the most important for advertisers, since it refers not so much to their purchasing power but to the power of influence that the small ones exert in the purchase decisions of their parents. This ability to influence them increases with the age of the child and can include both small purchases and others that involve greater spending.

Salgado Carrión (2006) suggests that the weight of the minors’ opinions in family purchases is increasing due to various sociological changes occurred over recent years, of which the most important are: greater level of income per child due to the incorporation of women into the work field and the tendency to have fewer children; delaying parenthood until having a well-off position with a larger budget; more and more separated parents, inclined to satisfy every whim; the role of grandparents, more present in the education of their grandchildren (as a result of both parents working) and with greater income availability.

Aware of the influential role of children in family purchasing decisions, brands and advertisers are encouraged, through advertising strategies, to aim at this consumer profile on the screens and platforms they usually access. A recent study on digital consumption of children and young people in Chile funded by VTR (2018) highlights the fact that the main activity children do online is to watch videos, which is why this

research seeks to measure the advertising pressure that a minor can receive through the contents they access through YouTube.

YouTube has emerged as a fertile platform for advertisers, since it provides novel and often invasive forms for advertising formats previously linked only to television (Malin, 2011; Susarla, Oh & Tan, 2012). Moreover, academics talk about the birth of a new genre where, through playfulness, children and young people can access to certain products. It is the “toy unboxing” format in which, through amateur-looking videos, a product is unboxed and used, and its features are intensively shown (Craig & Duncan, 2017; Marsh, 2015).

It is in this digital context –where the limits of advertising and gaming merge– that this case study was born: we selected a theme interesting to the children’s audience, the television series *Soy Luna*, an Argentine telenovela produced by Disney Latin America Channel that has had great success in the region and in Spain since the broadcast of its first chapter in March and April 2016, respectively. This is a series for children and adolescents that has had an impact on audience (rating); when it premiered, it had more than 2.3 million viewers in the region and was the time slot leader between girls aged 4 to 17 (Figueroa, 2017).

The success lasted until the end of the first season: the last episode was a record of audience in Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Colombia, Peru and Brazil (Televisión.com.ar, 2016). In addition, it has a high presence in social networks and merchandising, in particular the skates that are the trademark of the protagonist. Therefore, the elements that make this series an ideal topic to conduct this research are that it has an impact on the target population (children and adolescents), it has a strong presence in social networks, and the development of merchandising products.

### 3 Methodology

In order to analyze the advertising volume shown by YouTube after a normal search of contents, we followed an interpretive approach and, as mentioned, we used the case study technique, applying it to the *Soy Luna* series.

We used as sample the videos on the first page of the search results –which are ranked by relevance–, i.e., 18 videos, to which we added the videos suggested during the viewing (located on the right side of the screen). Overall, the sample consisted of 143 videos, to which we applied the following methodological techniques:

- A content analysis on the advertising or non-advertising intentionality of the videos resulting from the intuitive search.
- Since the research is conducted by a user of this community, it would be, in turn, a participant research that, as stated by Wimmer and Dominick, has the advantage of providing very detailed, full of subtleties references (Wimmer and Dominick, 1996, p.13).

The aim of this work was to check the level of advertising pressure that the children's audience experiences when consuming certain audiovisual content on YouTube. This study excludes advertising inputs that use YouTube as a support (as a container for commercial messages) since we placed the focus on the video content: we sought to know if certain goods or services acquire greater relevance in the form of demonstrations or exhibitions.

To conduct the work, we prepared an analysis code-sheet to study each video of the sample; the purpose was to obtain homogeneous data that could be compared and analyzed to draw conclusions. The study variables considered to analyze each content – which constitute the code-sheets– were:

- Identification of the profile of the channels that contain videos with advertising messages.
- The relationship of products and brands highlighted in the content of the videos, which were accessed after a very specific search, looking for entertainment.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Youtube Channels with “Advertising Content”

One of the analysis variables are the channels that host this content defined as advertising. After reviewing the sample, there are three channel profiles that show promotional videos:

- Official channels: the advertising that we detected was merchandising, with special emphasis on the original skates used by the protagonists, the symbol of the story. There is not a direct reference to the product, but the advertising comes from tutorials, tips, or tricks to customize the official skates in the style of the series’ characters.
- YouTubers channels, specifically girls of the same age as the spectators of this series. Their commercial messages follow the line of the official channels, i.e., they promote in a closer and personal way the merchandising of the series, again with a very prominent presence of the official skates.
- Toy unboxing channels: those in which the main contents are the unpacking, revisions and/or demonstrations of toys. Some channels also prepare games and contests in which the exhibition of toys has a crucial role, or stories with dolls in which their features and complements are exposed. Unlike the previous ones, this channel profile does not promote products related to *Soy Luna*. However, their videos appear in the search because the metadata includes a list of popular names of toys and series, hence this type of channels enhances the promotion of toys and accessories beyond those linked to the series’ brand.

### 4.2 Differentiated Products 1nd Brands

Once all the videos of the sample defined for this research as advertising content were visualized, we classified the promoted products into four main types, all aimed at a children’s audience: firstly, surprise toys; *Soy Luna* products, visible in



smaller proportion than the previous ones; other toys (mostly spinners and dolls), featured in third place and – secondarily– food products.

- Surprise toys: this are different types of packages or bags containing small toys that the consumer must discover and open, exploiting the surprise effect generated by ignoring the content (eggs, boxes or surprise bags). This type of products is shown directly to the camera under the classic technique of unboxing and demonstration.

In this scenario, there were cases in which the producers of the video devise games and/or contests to exhibit the toys, following the strategy of the surprise effect. As an example, one of the videos analyzed proposed a roulette as a way to unpack a wide variety of toys and accessories with a high dose of fascination (from miniature Minions to beauty supplements).

- *Soy Luna* products, with had the biggest presence in the resulting sample, given the thematic link with the keywords used in the initial search. As mentioned before, the most recurrent product is skates, both explicitly (YouTubers that acquire the product and make a demonstration) and implicitly (Disney Channel tutorials to customize the official skates of the series). Likewise, merchandising objects –school supplies, makeup, small accessories...– also appeared during the viewing of the videos.
- Other toys: besides the toys that “exploit” the surprise effect and all the objects with the *Soy Luna* brand, during the review of the sample we identified a third line of products of interest for the female children’s audience: the dolls and the promotion and customization of fidget spinners, a small rotating anti-stress accessory patented in 1993 as a tool to reduce anxiety and increase concentration capacity and which in 2017 became the fashion toy in the schoolyard. As a distinguishing feature, these audiovisual pieces present a narrative component, i.e., in addition to showing the doll’s functionalities, there are stories (trips, pool gatherings, visits to hotels ...) around said toy, animated by human hands.
- Food products: present in a lower proportion than the other categories mentioned. We mainly recognized sweet foods, cookies, cakes in which both

products and brands were promoted (example: Oreo, Cola-Cao) as ingredients for their preparation; for example, a tutorial to prepare a cake with a spinner shape. In a timely manner also appeared the McDonald’s Happy Box, which is very popular among children.

We also registered the brands that appeared throughout this study, with a prominent presence of Play-Doh and the world-brand of *Soy Luna* (Scolari, 2013) under a licensing strategy with which certain brands (the Play- Doh, Mattel, Diset or Knex) link the functionality of their products with the prestige and success associated with the youth series. It is a marketing resource of mutual benefit, since the brand manages to prevail through products that last beyond the period of broadcasting and the licensed objects are gain the added value of the story of Luna Valente (Tur Viñes & Ramos, 2008).

[Table 13.1]

Table 13.1. List of brands/advertisers found during the investigation

Num Noms
You&Me, Nenuco, baby
Play Doh
Soy Luna
Cola-Cao
Mattel (Barbie)
Diset
American Girl
Project MC2
Dylan´s Candy Bar
Knex
Oreo
Soggy Doggy
L.O.L Surprise dolls
McDonalds
Kelly Green
Spin Master (Hatchimals+LOL)

Famosa (creador de globos brillantes)
Combi línea María
Hasbro
Fisher Price
Source: Own elaboration.

## 5 Conclusions

In a context of high digitization and access to social networks by children, this paper examines how advertising has permeated in a playful and unclear way spaces previously linked exclusively to children's entertainment. Through seemingly innocuous videos, advertisers and toy companies have taken over not only the formats but also a kind of entertainment, using a close narrative such as the demonstration of toys' functioning to capture the attention and preference of the children. This means that the child is seen as a consumer (Salgado Carrión, 2006) who, through novelty and entertainment, is guided to prefer certain brands or products.

This is how, after analyzing 143 videos selected from a search on YouTube of a successful children and young people series, *Soy Luna*, this paper reports a highly dynamic and complex panorama. First, that in addition to the videos related to the series, the search leads to channels with advertising content, official and unofficial, where information about the products associated with the series is delivered. Also, the birth of YouTubers channels, with commercial messages that appear in a discourse that, although it is not focused on the product, incorporates its elements to the narrative. This means that merchandising is a present and necessary part of their channels. Also, we found channels dedicated to the exhibition of toys, where the objective is to demonstrate how the products are used and their advantages. However, they are not products that are necessarily related to the series directly, but rather aim at the same objective public. This is perhaps one of the most striking aspects of how this target audience is also a captive audience, accessed through audiovisual content that is not necessarily related to advertising products. In this regard, the discussion must be focused in to three relevant aspects.

The first, linked to how advertising has found new spaces to attract young audiences, and how it is often presented in disguised forms through games and narratives linked to products. Second, how YouTubers videos have become viralized and somehow legitimized as advertising agents from children and for children. Finally, it opens new questions about how this scenario will evolve, considering that children are getting mobile phones at an early age and that the digital and connectivity environment is less and less regulated.

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