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Media Release

Toy companies creating apps that market to babies

Researcher argues that advertising guidelines for children outdated in digital age

ST CATHARINES, Ontario — May 26, 2014 — The lack of regulation of digital advertising for children is allowing toy companies to create apps that market directly to babies and toddlers, says a York University PhD student.

Cheryl Williams, who had a career in marketing before starting her PhD in communications (she's also a parent), conducted a pilot study of the content of five Fisher-Price baby apps for tablets and mobile devices. She is presenting the results of the study at the 2014 Congress of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

She says the apps are games created for children six months and up.

The games feature banner ads that pop up if a child taps a certain spot. The ads, she said, market toys that are directly related to the game in question.

"The pop-up ads are targeted," she said. "They advertise the Fisher-Price product that is featured in the game."

Williams argues that the toy companies are using the apps to train babies to recognize logos and specific toys. Even if they can't yet speak, babies can point to the toys in a store – thereby encouraging their parents to buy them.

Williams says the issue of apps aimed at babies is important because the amount of time children spend in front of a TV is decreasing as tablets and mobile devices become more popular.

She found that 38 per cent of children under the age of two have used a tablet or smart phone, and six per cent do so every day.



Toy companies know this, she says, and are developing more and more apps for babies, arguing that those apps are educational.

Williams says that is misleading.

She says that both the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Canadian Paediatric Society discourage exposure to screens for children under the age of two: “They both say there’s no research showing it is beneficial.”

Williams says it is well known that children are susceptible to advertising, and for that reason TV advertising aimed at children is regulated.

“For example, they will say, ‘We now pause for this commercial message’ before a commercial. Because children don’t know the difference between content and advertising, you must make it clear that a commercial message is coming up. And advertisers are not allowed to say things like, ‘Hey, kids, get your parents to buy you this!’

“But in digital advertising there is no regulation.”

Babies, she says, are easily able to use devices that require only tapping to function. One common marketing device in tablets is the pop-up ad.

Because they are unable to distinguish between content and advertising, babies may in fact think that the pop-up ad is a ‘reward’ or part of the game itself.

“They call these games educational, but what I am arguing is that these are actually advertising,” she said.

Williams is planning a broader study involving 40 or 50 apps.

“What I’m hoping is that I can raise awareness of the need for regulation of digital advertising for children,” she said.

“The existing guidelines are outdated and not in line with children’s current media practices.”

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About the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences

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