

The digital age: an exploration of the influence of media on children's lives

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Introduction

This research looks at how technology, and in particular visual media (television, Internet and video games), has influenced the lives of young children. In the last two decades the amount of children's media usage time has increased significantly, which affects their play, learning, interactions and development, particularly as consumers. To date there has been no in depth analysis of the nature of children's interactions with media and, this has led to the development of the following research questions:

- How are children affected by the technology they use?
- How many hours and what kinds of media are predominantly used by children?
- How and what kind of products are marketed to children?
- What is the effect of marketing on children?
- How has the role of children as consumers changed?

Children for the purposes of this article will be defined as between 0-10 years of age, due to the fact that research has shown that children do not fully understand the meaning of adverts; that they can coerce and persuade the viewer to buy something, until around nine years of age.

Children and the Media

Contemporary childhood is characterised by early and frequent media use, preparing children for lifelong relationships with communication technologies. The home environment is an important and vital context as parents make technology available and play a role in socialising children to use media in specific ways. A wide variety of television channels are now available on digital television, including many channels aimed at even the youngest of children. Many of these channels broadcast programmes until the late hours of the evening and some run for twenty four hours of the day, seven days a week. Studies have shown that many children now have television sets in their bedroom and are therefore

watching television for many hours in the evening before going to bed. This can have an impact on their performance in school the next day, with many teachers reporting that children in their class have poor concentration and are very tired if they have been watching television until late at night. Children, however, are not just watching *child-specific* television channels; many children will watch television with their parents or older siblings and thus have access to programme content that is not suitable for their age group.

Due to the increase in recent years in media aimed directly at infants and toddlers, and the accompanying advertising, the youngest members of society are being exposed to more forms of visual media (television, video games and Internet) than ever before. Pre-school age children are uniquely susceptible to advertising, as children in this age group have problems distinguishing television programmes from commercials and also find it difficult to separate between reality and what they see on television, even if a programme is animated. Pre-schoolers are likely to view advertisements as objective statement of facts, that is, unbiased pieces of information designed to tell them about a toy or food product and they lack the ability to comprehend an advertisement's intention to sell. Contemporary children are very media savvy and live their lives surrounded by an increasing amount of digital, interactive media. It is our responsibility as parents, educators and carers to prepare them for this world but also to protect them from the undue influence of unscrupulous marketing. The primary aim of all marketing is to generate revenue and there are some seriously ethical questions which need to be addressed in relation to the nature, type and volume of media messages targeted at young children.

Types of Media Used by Children

Television still remains the favourite and most widely used medium among children and television viewing time has not been displaced by other media. In fact, the time children spend watching television has stayed the same but time spent with media as a whole has increased with children now become regular Internet users and video game players. The Internet is now widely available in most homes, and the majority of children are competent computer users. If used, correctly, the Internet can be a fantastic tool in educating children and is used in many cases as a homework aid. However, the Internet does not have a rating system like television programmes, films and video games, and therefore it is very difficult to police what content is available and it is very easy for children to gain access to unsavoury and unsuitable material.

Video games, once the preserve of amusement arcades, are now commonplace in many homes. A European wide rating scale, *The Pan European Game Information* (PEGI), exists for video games, but research has shown that the majority of children do not play video games suitable for their age group. It was discovered that this was due to lack of parental awareness or knowledge of the rating scale for video games, as well as peer pressure

among children themselves to have the latest popular game. Many parents cited pressure from their children as a reason for purchasing the latest video game. Whilst there are some educational video games available, the majority of games that appeal to children contain some elements of violence and/or anti-social behaviour. There are, however, positive effects of video games provided that they are the correct kind of video games – ones that stimulate cognitive, physical and creative development.

Research has shown that many children are now media *multi-taskers* – using more than one medium at the same time. Media has also become convergent with many television programmes offering special episodes or competitions online. The attraction of television is the fact that it is ever evolving with recent advancements including digital and high definition television features. Another issue relating to media use is the lack of knowledge that adults possess about the medium. Children are essentially, *digital natives*, and other adults including their parents and teachers, digital immigrants. Digital natives have a very different style of learning, one in which they learn by doing rather than by following a set of sequential steps. They feel that *digital immigrants* speak a different language to them.

Technology offers extraordinary opportunities for all of society including children and young people. The Internet allows for global exploration which can also bring risks – the online world paralleling but also in some ways diverging from the offline world, and video gaming offers a range of interactive experiences to children; however, some of these are designed for adults. Many parents believe that it is no longer safe to leave their children play outside, however many dangers, termed *stranger dangers*, are being brought into the home through the technologies that children use.

The Internet and video games are very popular with children and offer a range of opportunities, for fun, learning and development. However, there are concerns over potentially inappropriate material, which range from content through to contact and conduct of children in the digital world. Children need to be empowered to keep themselves safe. Media can have many positive consequences too; however, it needs to be used correctly. Television documentaries and websites can afford the opportunity to learn a lot on different, sometimes obscure topics. Video games, provided they are the correct type of video game, can also aid children's learning. Many also argue that the media allows children to act out real life situations without the fear of danger or repercussions and that it allows a role play for real life within a secure environment. In the 21st century it is vital that children are media literate and familiar with technology. However, the role of parents and teachers is to show children how to use these media in a responsible way. This can be difficult due to the generational divide.

Children as Consumers

The role that children play within the marketplace has evolved greatly in the last two decades. Previously, children were not regarded as active participants within the consumer process and marketers focused their attention on parents and guardians — the gatekeepers of the family purse — when promoting and selling children's products. A shift has occurred, however, and during the last twenty years children have come to be recognised as consumers in their own right, independent of their parents. This is due, in part, to the influence that the media and in particular, advertising, has had on the lives of children. The aim of marketers is to create *cradle to grave customers* and establish brands that children feel they cannot live without; to create something that is so important in the lives of children that they *must have it*, or if they do not have it they will be set aside as different from their peers. Proponents of marketing to children believe that they are *the brightest stars in the consumer constellation*.

Children are now regarded as occupying three distinct markets: the current market, future market and influence market. Research has shown that children now receive more pocket money than ever before and make more independent purchases, thereby making them a lucrative current market. In their aim to create the aforementioned *cradle to grave market*, marketers try to ensure that they attract children to brands or products that they may need in the future. This is done through savvy advertising and product placement. The *influence* market is probably the most important from a marketer's point of view. Various studies have reported that children have had influence on grand scale purchases such as family holidays or the family car. At a smaller level, children most definitely have influence over food purchases for the family and this has been linked in many studies to the influence of advertising

The Study

This study utilised qualitative and quantitative research methods. Focus Groups were carried out with children, in 2nd and 4th classes, in Cork city, in order to ascertain their views on the impact that media has on their daily lives. A nationwide questionnaire was also distributed to a randomly stratified selection of teachers of 2nd and 4th class. The questionnaire was piloted locally.

The data is currently being analysed; however, some preliminary findings show that children are very media aware and spend a vast amount of time engaging with digital media. Television, for children in this study, remains the favourite medium; however, a substantial amount of time is also spent using the Internet and video games. Many children are also media multi-taskers. Teachers felt that the *media education* strand of the Social, Political and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum was sufficient, however they felt they were

constrained in their teaching by lack of time and resources. They also felt that ultimate responsibility for media monitoring and education lay with parents. The parents in this study were concerned about the amount of time their children spent using media and often felt that it was to the detriment of other activities, such as playing with older siblings or exercising. They also found it extremely difficult to monitor and in some cases control their children's media use. Both parents and teachers acknowledged that children were now savvy consumers, with teachers in particular commenting on the emphasis children now placed on material possessions. The majority of parents revealed that their children had a lot of influence on family purchases.

This research looked at how technology, and in particular visual media, has influenced the lives of young children. It has considered how young children, termed *digital natives* live in the contemporary technologically advanced world and how best we can support them in their development. In our rapidly changing and ever developing technological world we have a responsibility to ensure our children are educated to use media safely and well. We must educate ourselves so that we can take part in and monitor children's media use. It is very important for our children's future physical and cognitive health that there is a balance between media based activities and other play based pursuits.

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