

A photograph of two young women in a shopping mall. The woman on the left, with her hair in a ponytail and wearing a grey turtleneck, is holding a white shopping bag. The woman on the right, with long dark hair and wearing a brown top, is looking into the bag and holding a pink, fringed object. The background is a blurred shopping mall interior.

AI TRANSLATED REPORT, for the original and full report
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- Children as consumers in a digital age

A photograph showing a person's legs in blue jeans and tan pants, sitting on a wooden bench. They are holding a large, white, rectangular shopping bag. The text 'STOP SVIGT' is written in white, handwritten-style letters in the bottom right corner.

STOP
SVIGT

Foreword

At Børns Vilkår, we know that many children desire to look a certain way or to own specific things. At the BørneTelefonen (Child Helpline), we are regularly contacted by children seeking advice on what makeup and branded clothes to buy. The children want to fit in with their peers, and often, they try to achieve that through consumption.

For example, a 13-year-old girl sought advice on our column "Children Help Children:" *"I know this sounds silly, but does anyone know where I can buy modern clothes? I'm trying to become more popular in my class, because the others never listen to me."*

The trends and norms for consumption that children encounter in their daily lives are often created on social media. Today, almost all children have a profile on a social media platform before they turn 13 years old. Many children spend several hours daily watching content online.

Digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and online games are not just communication channels and entertainment – they are finely tuned commercial marketplaces where children constantly encounter advertisements and commercial content. The commercial nature of the content ranges from obvious to hidden. In this report, we reveal that up to half of the content a new 13-year-old is exposed to is commercial content of various kinds. This demonstrates how companies and tech giants are intensely competing for children's time, attention, and pocket money, leveraging a deep understanding of digital behavior and psychology. They employ retention mechanisms and subtle marketing tactics that children are rarely equipped to recognize. Despite legislation in the area, children are effectively exposed to an unregulated market where influences come from everywhere and in all disguises. No one can discern how constant advertising pressure affects us, and neither should children. It is the responsibility of adults.

In this report, we focus on what children encounter when they venture into society as new consumers. What role do consumption and trends play in children's communities? And what does it mean to grow up in a reality where digital platforms, algorithms, and influencers shape both desires, dreams, and consumption habits? These are questions we attempt to answer.

The report is intended for politicians, decision-makers, parents, and others who want to help build a better understanding of the reality children grow up in – and take action on it. Our hope is to highlight why it is necessary to strengthen the protection of children on digital platforms and to give them the best possible foundation for navigating the reality we have created for them. This requires a comprehensive effort.

Sincerely,
Rasmus Kjeldahl
Director of Børns Vilkår

Summary

Commercial interests pressure children's social lives

Many children are tempted when scrolling through the constant stream of content on social media. They want to be part of the latest trend, wear a popular perfume, and have the right shoes – they want to be accepted by their peers. A new report by Børns Vilkår highlights this, examining how 5th and 8th grade students engage in consumption and what shapes their buying behavior. One in seven children say they often feel compelled to buy things they've seen on social media, while one in four have felt pressured to purchase something to gain acceptance in their class. In the report, Børns Vilkår also presents a digital experiment indicating that nearly half (46%) of the content that new 13-year-old profiles are exposed to on selected social media has a commercial purpose.

Consumer goods and trends play a major role in many children's social lives. It's about keeping up with trends and being able to talk about everything from chips and lip masks to scooter parts and perfumes. Some children feel pressure to constantly keep up. Social media and companies contribute to this pressure by exposing children to commercial content that entices consumption. Children frequently contact BørneTelefonen (Child Helpline) and express their desire to fit in with their peers. They seek advice on what clothes to buy or whether they should start wearing makeup. They hope that buying the “right” things will help them fit in.

This report is based on a survey of 3,078 children in 5th and 8th grade and interviews with 69 other children at the same grade level. We asked the children what consumption, trends, purchases, and desires mean for their communities, and how they perceive that digital platforms such as social media influence their consumption behavior.

As part of understanding the influence children are exposed to through social media, we have also conducted a digital experiment. The experiment is a categorization and counting of the posts that new 13- and 18-year-old users encounter on three social media platforms, aiming to uncover the extent of commercial content that children and young people are exposed to.

Consumer habits influence children's everyday lives

Children in 5th and 8th grade are learning to navigate consumer culture. They make wish lists, save and earn money, and often think carefully about how to spend it. This can include clothing, shoes, snacks, candy, beauty products, and gaming items. The report shows that children's consumption is closely tied to their interests and social circles. For example, many girls spend time and money finding the exact makeup products they know from TikTok and Instagram. Similarly, many boys in the study say it's important to spend money on their hobbies and social activities – whether it's gaming, working out, or meeting up to repair scooters after school.

After school, many children spend time shopping or eating out with friends. In the survey, 41% agree completely or partially that they often do things that cost money when they are with their friends. This is most common among girls in the 8th grade (57%) compared to boys (45%).

When social interactions revolve around consumption, it can create pressure and exclude children who can't afford to participate. Some of the classes that Børns Vilkår has visited are characterized by narrow norms. Children report that to fit in, they need the right clothing style, popular brands, and knowledge of current trends. As a result, many children invest significant time, energy, and money to keep up with social norms. In the survey, 26% of children in the 5th and 8th grade indicate that they have felt pressured to buy something specific to be accepted in their class at least once. Among girls, the number rises to one in three.

Children find inspiration for new desires and purchases on social media

98% of children in grades 5 and 8 use social media. Snapchat, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram are the most popular. According to Børns Vilkår's survey, 64% of children use social media to get ideas for everything from perfumes and fashion to snacks and candy to share with friends.

Children who get inspiration online primarily receive it from influencers (64%) or by following stores and companies (50%). 43% of children say they're influenced by algorithm-driven content tailored to their past likes, shares, and viewing habits.. One in four children indicates that they get inspiration for new purchases from advertisements on digital platforms.

31% of 5th graders and 41% of 8th graders say they feel the urge to buy things they see on social media at least once a week. For every seventh child, the desire to purchase arises several times a day. At the same time, eight out of ten children (78%) in the survey state that they have tried to get or buy something they saw on social media at least once. Among 8th grade girls, 84% have bought or received something they saw in their social media feed.

Children face intense advertising exposure on social media

New users on a social media platform like TikTok or Instagram are met with an endless content feed. Here, there is a quirky mix of content: sketches, AI videos, and advertisements for mobile games. Some of the content comes directly from commercial actors or is created with commercial intent.

Børns Vilkår has investigated the proportion of content that has a commercial purpose in a digital experiment. We created profiles for fictional 13-year-old users on three of the most popular social media platforms: YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. It found that nearly half (46%) of the content shown to new 13-year-old users had a commercial nature. The commercial content varies widely – from advertisements and paid influencer content to content from brand profiles, such as sports brands or food producers. Not all content is easily recognizable as

advertisements, and not all commercial content has an advertisement marking. This makes it difficult for users – especially children – to discern the commercial intentions.

Stores, influencers, and digital platforms use tools that capture children's attention

It's increasingly difficult to tell when content is actually digital marketing. Commercial content often blurs the line between entertainment and advertising. Digital marketing uses psychological insights and behavioral data to create engaging ads – often through gamification or competitions.

Many children feel tempted to buy products promoted by influencers, even if they're unsure whether the recommendations are trustworthy. Like influencers, Ønskeskyen and Normal use digital marketing strategies to capture children's attention and encourage engagement.

Ønskeskyen is an online wish list platform that resembles social media, offering children a continuous stream of products to add to their lists. Normal is a retail chain that leverages social media and viral trends to draw children and young people into its stores.

Børns Vilkår recommends

Recommendations for politicians

Children are particularly susceptible to marketing and advertisements. Therefore, we have a tradition in Denmark of protecting children, especially from marketing. However, the development of digital business models challenges this protection. The study shows that children are exposed to large amounts of commercial content when they interact on social media, and that it can be opaque and difficult for children to decode that there are commercial interests from companies and influencers.

Children are spending increasing amounts of time on social media and games, where they encounter large amounts of commercial content. More refined ways of personally targeting marketing are still being developed, making it harder to resist. At the same time, the influence is not confined to a specific time and place – like advertisements at a bus stop – but follows them through the day.

It is far from transparent what interests lie behind digital marketing, influencer content, etc. At the same time, many children are often alone in the digital universe without anyone to guide and help them with critical decision-making.

Børns Vilkår therefore recommends:

Limit digital marketing for commercial products and services directed at children

When children are online, they are significantly exposed to advertisements, ads, and marketing for commercial products and services. Marketing on social media is far more targeted, effective, extensive, and opaque than traditional marketing. This can have negative consequences for children's well-being. Therefore, there should be efforts at the EU level for strong limitations on digital marketing directed at children under 15 years old. Additionally, efforts should be made to limit what marketing tactics are allowed concerning children and to ensure clearer markings of commercial content. The government and the Parliament should work in the EU for a childhood that is not negatively influenced by commercial interests.

Age verification should support an advertisement-free childhood

For children under 15 to be shielded from digital marketing for commercial services and products, effective age verification is necessary. If the platform does not use an effective and privacy-secured age verification method, and the platform can be accessed by children, it should be free of advertisements, ads, and marketing for commercial services and products. If the platforms do not ensure this themselves, it should be done through EU legislation.

Prioritize children's voices and child involvement in the EU's regulatory work

In the coming years, politicians and the EU Commission should develop legislation on consumers' rights online and regulation of digital services. This should be done with the so-called "Digital Fairness Act." In this work, politicians in Denmark and the EU Commission should prioritize involving children's knowledge, experiences, and solutions so that the legislation has a solid knowledge base about their digital lives. This way, the best conditions are created for addressing current and future challenges.