

What parents need to know: Latest trends in children's internet use

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*Alexandra Chernyavskaya takes a critical look at Ofcom's latest **Children and parents: Media use and attitudes report** and outlines three current trends in children's internet use, and why parents need to know what their children are doing online. Alexandra is a postgraduate student in the **Department of Media and Communications** at the LSE and she works as Project Support Assistant for the **EU Kids Online** project.*

When looking at the structure of the contemporary media ecosystem, it is hard to deny that a number of significant changes have occurred within it in the past 10 years. These include more variety in 'smart' devices available to users, an ever-present internet connection, and an unlimited amount of high-quality content produced under different funding schemes. Indeed, the latest **Children and parents: Media use and attitudes report**, published by **Ofcom** in November, indicates that while the overall take-up of such key media as the internet, television and mobile devices has not changed as drastically as one might expect, the experience of using these devices has been transformed.

With changing patterns of media consumption, parents who wish to remain aware of their children's activities, particularly their online activities, face certain challenges, one of which is not knowing what to expect and where to look. Ofcom's latest research on children's media use should point them in the right direction.

Trend 1: YouTube and new celebrities

Ofcom's research indicates that in 2015, for the first time, children older than 12 were saying that they either preferred YouTube over other sources of video content, or that they liked both television and YouTube. YouTube's features, such as the ability to choose content, to inspire the creation of new content and to learn new skills by watching 'how-to' videos is attractive to the

younger generation. Popular YouTube content is also used as a form of 'playground currency' and a topic to discuss with friends.

Another emerging trend is teenagers' growing fascination with a new generation of 'influencers', video bloggers. These young video bloggers, or 'vloggers', express their thoughts and ideas by recording videos and uploading them to their YouTube page. These are subsequently watched and discussed by thousands of young viewers. And the higher-profile vloggers can earn money by mentioning specific products in their videos. Indeed, being a YouTube celebrity has now become a career aspiration for many children.

Trend 2: Sponsored content and its reliability

Increased interest in these young trendsetters, however, often leads to awareness of paid endorsements for vloggers promoting certain products in their videos, although, in fact, less than half (47%) of the older children knew about the possibility for the owners of certain YouTube channels to be paid for advertising certain products or brands.

The fact that an increasing proportion of content consumed by children is accessed through digital intermediaries, such as Google, further challenges their ability to judge the reliability of the content they access. Their understanding of the paid advertising and funding of the content is not as high as might be hoped, as Ofcom's report highlights:

While 50% of search engine users aged 12–15 make some type of critical judgement about search engine results, believing that some of the sites returned will be truthful while others may not be, one in five (19%) believe that if a search engine lists information then it must be true, and a similar proportion (22%) don't consider the veracity of results but just visit the sites they like the look of.

Trend 3: In-app purchasing

Ofcom's research indicates an increase in smartphone ownership, particularly among older children. While only 4% of 5- to 7-year-olds owns a smartphone, the proportion rises to 69% for children aged 12–15. Tablet ownership among older children has also risen to 45%. With the greater availability of 'smart' devices, children have access to a wealth of mobile applications, including games. However, some aspects of these applications have become a source of worry, with 7% of younger children and 11% of older children saying that they feel pressure to make online or in-app purchases.

Dr Lynn Whitaker has investigated the issue of in-app purchasing, and spoke to children aged 6–12 about the fairness of online video games and, more specifically, the games in which the player may be pressured to spend money. One of the extreme examples that surfaced in her work was of a 9-year-old boy who spent almost £4,500 while playing a game on his tablet. He had made over 100 transactions unnoticed by his parents until they received their credit card bill. While this is certainly shocking, the story points to the risks posed by in-app purchases.

But research also indicates that children who play games are often sceptical of the option to pay money to advance further in a game. The majority of older children (aged 12–15) say that they are aware of the possibility of pay-to-win, and that it is present in all or most of the games they play. Just slightly over half of 12- to 15-year-olds (52%) believe that paying to advance in a game is a bad thing.

Understanding current trends

When taking these emerging trends into account, it is key for parents to understand and then explain the aspects of content funding and reliability to young internet users. While Ofcom's latest

research indicates that parents tend to use a range of mediation strategies, such as those discussed on this blog before, in order to educate and protect their children online, they may need to equip their children with skills that are not necessarily specific to their internet activities, such as the ability to assess the validity of information, and the reliability of their source.

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