

# Pictogram to alert kids to influencing

It is often hard, especially for children, to tell the difference between commercial and non-commercial content in online videos. Sophie Boerman (associate professor of Persuasive Communications) and fellow communication scientists Eva van Reijmersdal (University of Amsterdam) and Esther Rozendaal (Erasmus) investigated whether a viewing-guide-style pictogram could be a solution.

When influencers start promoting something in return for a reward — whether money, free products or some other compensation — you basically have an advertisement. The Advertising Code Foundation says influencers need to state this explicitly. But at present, influencers are free to choose how they do so. A tiny hashtag (#ad) is sufficient. But as Boerman discovered in a previous eye-tracking study on Instagram, almost no one sees it.

## Missed

The communication scientists wondered whether a viewing-guide-style pictogram could help 8 to 18 year olds spot influencer marketing in online videos. They assessed which pictograms are associated with 'signs of advertising', developed three new pictograms in a co-creation project with children and tested them in a survey among over 250 children. They then tested the effectiveness in an online experiment in which nearly 700 children got to see YouTube videos with popular influencers that had the new warning pictograms. The participants turned out to recognize the value of such pictograms. They also had clear preferences for suitable variants. However, Boerman didn't find much of an effect on the children's 'advertising wisdom'. 'Firstly, they often missed the pictograms in the videos.



YouTuber Kalvijn was open about this #collab with Pringles, but that doesn't apply to all influencers by a long way • Photo still from @Kalvijn

Secondly, there was a kind of ceiling effect: lots of children already realized the video clips contained advertising, or they were triggered to realize that because they were getting questions about it. As a result, we found the pictogram only had a limited effect: even without it, the children knew they were watching an advert.'

So Boerman carried out additional research. 'We thought: what if we show an information video explaining what the pictogram means? If the children saw the symbol soon afterwards in an influencer clip, would they notice it then? No, they wouldn't,' says Boerman with a laugh. 'The information video increased their understanding of what the pictogram meant, but they still mostly missed the pictogram in the influencer video.'

## Sophisticated

The findings don't necessarily mean we need to despair, says Boerman. 'Habituation probably plays a big role. I can well imagine children noticing the pictogram once it has become a fixture, like the way you recognize at a glance the viewing guide icon for 'all

ages'. At any rate, my children aged five and seven are well aware it means

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anyone can watch the film or TV programme.' Boerman's findings don't mean the Advertising Code rules need to be abolished

either, she says. 'Transparency needs to remain the basis. Influencer marketing is a large grey area. Even I don't always know what it is I'm watching, although I've been researching this for years. Is it advertising or not? The influencer market is becoming increasingly professional and sophisticated. That is why transparency is so important: you need to be sure whether something is advertising or not.' ME