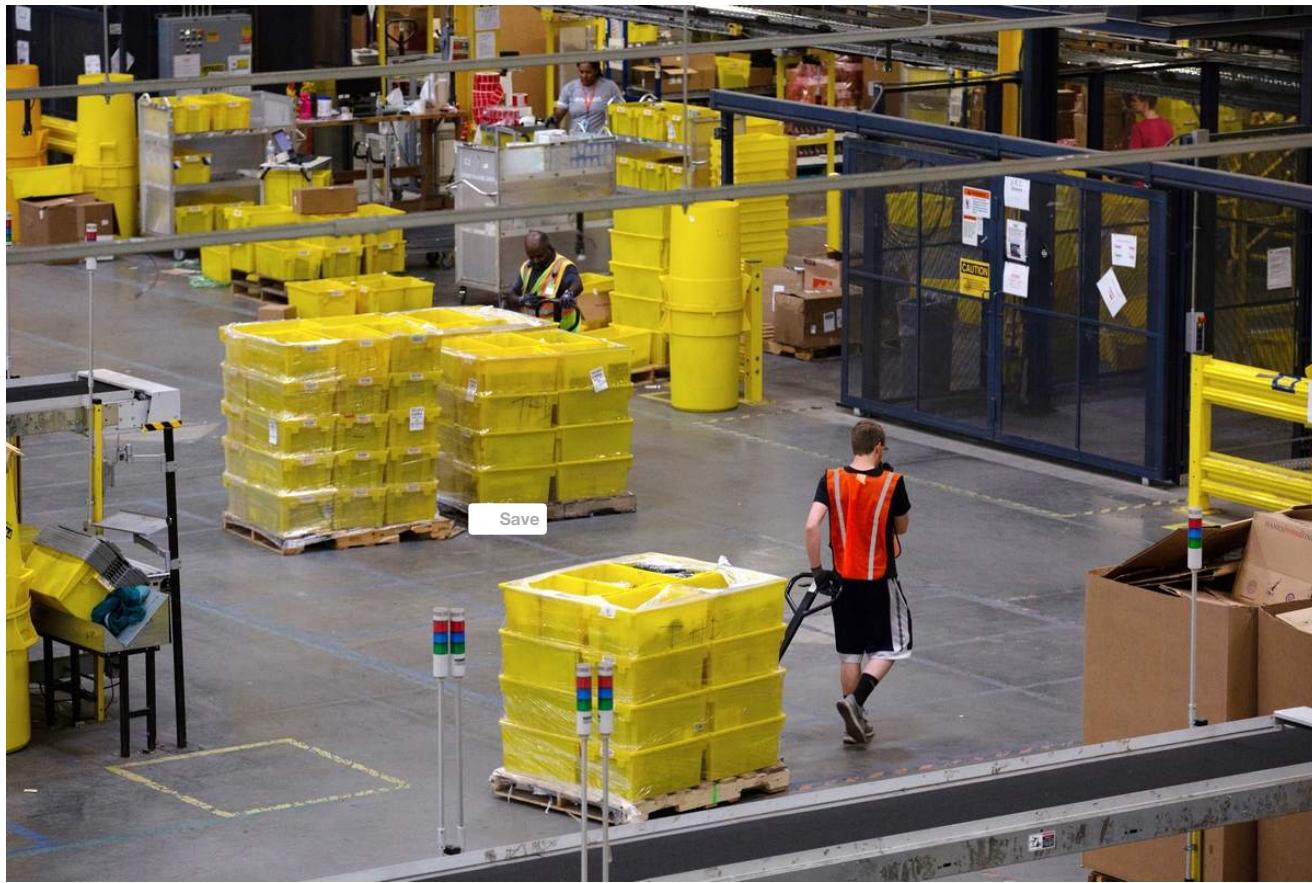


Online shopping is on the rise -- among kids. Here's how brands are courting them.



An employee pulls a pallet jack carrying plastic crates containing online orders at the Amazon.com fulfillment center in Robbinsville, N.J., on June 7, 2018. [Bloomberg photo by Bess Adler]

By Abha Bhattacharai, Washington Post

Published August 11 2018

Nine-year-old Isabella Colello shops for just about everything online.

She scrolls through the Amazon app on her phone at least once a day. She gets ideas from YouTube, searches on Google for things she wants and sends the links to her dad: Pink swimsuits, earrings, Adidas sneakers (he said yes); Gucci backpack (no).

"It's like, I'll put 18 items in my cart, and we'll end up getting like one or two," said Isabella, who lives in Sharpsville, Pennsylvania, and spends about \$100 a month online. "It's so much better than going to the mall because there aren't that many places to shop anymore."

Children and preteens are more connected to the internet than ever before, which means retailers are looking for new ways to market — and sell — directly to young shoppers on their phones, tablets and laptops. Gone are the days of blanket television ads, marketing experts say. Instead, companies are flocking to Snapchat, YouTube Kids and other mobile apps to reach children with personalized messages.

Nearly half of 10- to 12-year-olds have their own smartphones, according to Nielsen. By the time they're teenagers, 95 percent of Americans have access to a smartphone.

"Kids are shopping on their phones and influencing much more of their families' spending," said Katherine Cullen, director of retail and consumer insights for the National Retail Federation. "As a result, retailers are paying a lot more attention to pint-sized customers."

Back-to-school season is peak time for direct-to-kids marketing. Brands such as Five Star, which makes binders and folders, and Red Bull, the energy drink maker, have released new back-to-school "filters" on Snapchat, while clothing chain Justice is advertising in-store fashion shows on its app. Families are expected to spend an average of \$685 per household on clothing, shoes and other items for school-age children in the coming weeks, according to the National Retail Federation.

But advocacy groups say marketing to children directly on their smartphones — where companies can collect data on users and tailor ads to specific consumers — also raises a number of concerns, not just about privacy but also about the kind of influence those ads may have on young children.

"As adults, we might think it's a little weird or creepy if we're getting targeted ads that follow us from site to site," said Josh Golin, executive director of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood. "Kids, though, are especially vulnerable because they have no understanding of what those ads are or why they're seeing them."

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Nearly 1.5 million children age 11 and under have active Snapchat accounts, according to data from eMarketer, which expects continued double-digit growth in coming years. (Snapchat requires that users be at least 13.)

The social media platform — which is particularly popular among teenagers and 20-somethings — has emerged as a holy grail for retailers in search of young consumers. That is especially true, the company says, during back-to-school seasons, where last year users spent an extra 130 million hours using the platform to chat with friends and connect with popular brands like Vans, Hollister and Michael Kors.

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"Kids have their own screens and are choosing exactly what they want to watch at younger ages," said Nick Cicero, chief executive of Delmondo, a New York firm that helps brands such as Red Bull and MTV market themselves on Snapchat and other social media platforms."

Justice, the clothing brand, is popular among the under-13 crowd and pitches its mobile app to parents as "a safe place where your girl can create, engage and have fun with awesome girls just like herself." Once in the app, shoppers can save items to a wish list that they're encouraged to email to their parents.

Amazon.com, meanwhile, allows children as young as 13 to create their own logins for online purchases. (Parents can either set spending limits or ask to approve all purchases.) The company declined to say how many teenagers had signed up for teen accounts since they were introduced late last year but said "customer response has been strong." (Jeff Bezos, the founder and chief executive of Amazon, also owns the *Washington Post*.)

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It's been over a year, Kristin Harris says, since her kids watched TV.

Instead, her 6- and 10-year-old daughters spend hours a week watching videos on YouTube, where companies such as Nike and Nintendo routinely partner with "influencers" to get their toys, clothing and accessories featured in videos.

"The videos that really get their attention are the ones where kids are playing with toys like Breyer Horses or Hatchimals — those really get them interested," said Harris. "As an adult, you're like, 'Why are you watching this?' But the next thing you know, they're asking for Hatchimals because they saw them in a video."

It's become increasingly challenging, marketing experts said, to keep a child's interest — there is no expectation anymore that they'll have to sit through commercials during their favorite TV shows. Instead, they can skip through ads and easily close out of videos they're not interested in. As a result, brands such as Build-A-Bear, American Girl and Victoria's Secret's Pink now offer games and photo filters on their apps.

"Snapchat and YouTube have become a way for brands to market right to tweens — in fact, it's one of the only ways to get to them directly," said Gregg L. Witt, executive vice president of youth marketing for Motivate, an

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advertising firm in San Diego. "If you're trying to target a specific demographic, TV no longer works. You're going to mobile, digital, social media."

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But, he added, direct-marketing emails — the kind that might resonate with adults — haven't caught on with younger consumers. "If you're under 16, there's no way you're ever, ever checking your inbox," he said. "It's just not happening."

Isabella, the 9-year-old from Pennsylvania, gets most of her purchasing inspiration from YouTube personalities such as the Ace family, a Seattle family of three that posts videos with titles like "Giant fluffy slime comes alive!!!" and "1 year old baby unboxing the new iPhone 8!!!"

The videos, which have been viewed millions of times by the family's 10.5 million subscribers, aren't traditional commercials — they're better, Isabella says, because they're entertaining and informative. And they often result in a purchase down the line.

"When I find a YouTuber I like, I go straight on their website to shop," she said. She recently bought a \$60 Ace-family-branded backpack to take to fourth grade, and often wears hair bows and T-shirts by YouTube personality JoJo Siwa, who's 15.

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When she finds something she wants to buy, her parents type in their credit card information, and she hands over cash she's saved from birthdays, lemonade stands and her weekly allowance of about \$20. She also has a Snapchat account but so far hasn't used it to shop.

"I still have to beg my mom and dad for stuff, but now it's at home instead of at the store," Isabella said. "It's kind of easier this way."

Fiona Taylor's 11-year-old daughter, Arden, started shopping online two years ago when Arden, then in fourth grade, started helping her babysitter scour the Internet for a homecoming dress.

"They spent hours looking for the right outfit," Taylor said. "I think that's when she realized, 'Oh look, I can find all of this stuff online.' "

Just as well, says Taylor, whose family lives in New York City and hardly ever shops in physical stores anymore. Instead, they rely on Amazon for most of their purchases.

"When she's on a quest for something, she'll get very focused and spend, like, an hour looking for something specific on her laptop," Taylor said. "She's been sending me links for her Halloween costume since July."

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