



WEBPURIFY E-BOOK

Checking Out: Influencer Marketing, Online Shopping & Our Children

How the rise of e-commerce is impacting kids today





E-commerce has come a long way since Michael Aldrich invented online transaction processing in 1979. People now have 24/7 access to the goods and services they need, increasing productivity, enabling small businesses to thrive and, more recently during the pandemic, providing a lifeline for many.

In its 17 years working with e-commerce platforms as a content moderation service, WebPurify has witnessed key trends. “We work with some of the largest e-commerce sites in the world,” says Alexandra Popken, WebPurify’s VP of Trust and Safety. “We’ve long seen issues with counterfeit goods and misleading marketing tactics. Generative AI is now exacerbating these challenges by giving fraudsters access to a tool that can create fake listings and product reviews en masse.” While traditional online retailers, such as Amazon, eBay and Etsy first come to mind, an e-commerce site is any website that allows people to buy and sell physical goods, or digital products and services online.

“Numerous non-traditional industries have introduced e-commerce as a core product feature given how lucrative it’s become for these companies and their creators,” explains Alex. “For example, Instagram and TikTok are non-traditional e-commerce sites that have capitalized on the commerce wave in a major way.”

The question is: How is this affecting the world’s young online users who frequent the many platforms where e-commerce is now present? “We were interested in exploring the impact of e-commerce on a younger, more impressionable consumer cohort,” explains Alex.

“We know that kids spend so much time online, and we also know that the e-commerce industry is booming and permeating online spaces beyond traditional marketplaces — for example, social media and online gaming platforms have become ripe avenues for influencers and brands to sell their products to users.”

WebPurify's survey of over 1,000 parents explores children's online shopping habits — and highlights that it's a pertinent topic. Almost 7 out of 10 parents agree that more safety measures are required to limit children's access to online retail and social shopping platforms. But what are the evolving challenges of implementing safety measures, whose responsibility is it and how hard is it to put policy in place?

Interviewee bios



ALEXANDRA POPKEN

VP of Trust of Safety, WebPurify

Alex is a seasoned technology leader, who joined Twitter in 2013 as the second hire focused on moderating advertising content and scaling a robust policy enforcement operation. Over the past decade, she has led or played a part in key milestones in content moderation: the enforcement of civic integrity policies in ads, the formation of brand safety as a concept and approach, and the always-on threat mitigation of adversaries manipulating people and platforms. Most recently, Alex led all Trust & Safety operations teams at Twitter, spanning the consumer and monetization spheres, before joining WebPurify as VP of Trust & Safety in 2023.



VAISHNAVI J

*Policy Advisor & Founder,
Vyanams Strategies (VYS)*

Vaishnavi has over 15 years' experience developing, scaling, and enforcing youth safety at leading technology companies. At VYS, her team supports companies, governments, and civil society with responsibly designing products that support the safety and wellbeing of children. Prior to VYS, she was Head of Youth Policy at Meta, responsible for the company's approach to age-appropriate experiences across all its products, including Reality Labs, Instagram, Facebook, Messenger, and WhatsApp. She previously led video policies at Twitter, was Twitter's first Head of Safety in the Asia-Pacific, and led child safety policy in the region for Google's central team.

PARENTS SPEAK OUT

Survey results

- On average, US parents say their child is spending **2.3 hours** a week shopping online.
- Children 8 and younger spend an average of **2.48 hours** per week shopping online — the most of any age group. This is more than 9-12 year olds (2.16 hours per week), and more than 13-18 year olds (2.27 hours).
- **22%** of parents say their child prefers online shopping to other forms of entertainment, such as watching TV.
- **16%** of parents think their child is addicted to online shopping.
- **50%** of parents are uncomfortable with their children making unsupervised purchases.
- Almost **20%** say their child has bought an item inappropriate for their age while shopping online.
- But **19%** of parents said their child intervened to prevent them from falling for a scam, and more than **a third** of parents said their kids' online shopping has taught them money management skills.

“On the one hand, this behavior really isn’t that different from my elementary school days of grabbing the Sears catalog and making a shopping list of everything I would buy if I had unlimited funds,” reflects Forbes journalist Nikki Baird, in [her coverage of the report](#). “It’s just that the buy button is a lot closer to hand for today’s kids.”

But is combining the addictive nature of social media with an optimized ‘buy’ button good for developing brains?

“We know that many children are addicted to their devices, but I was surprised to learn that kids are spending over two hours a week online shopping,” admits Alex.

“As I dove deeper into the issue, however, I considered how e-commerce is literally everywhere. With the meteoric rise of the ‘influencer’, including [child influencers themselves](#), I suppose I’m now surprised that this figure isn’t even higher. Kids are inundated with product messaging, subliminal or otherwise, and they’re responding.”

There are countless media reports of [teen boys succumbing to influencer marketing](#) and buying luxury colognes worth three figures, and children becoming obsessed with the latest skincare products, such as [Drunk Elephant](#). Anecdotally, parents are reporting even two- and three-year-olds populating their Christmas lists with toys spied on YouTube Kids.

The creator economy is exploding – expected to grow to [half-a-trillion dollars by 2027](#) – meaning that young consumers are going to be increasingly influenced to purchase products online through social media sites and otherwise. Gen Alpha is particularly susceptible to this influence.

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Generative AI is intensifying the issues surrounding fake products, amplifying the existing challenges of intellectual property infringement, counterfeit goods, and scams on these platforms.

This begs the question: what measures can businesses implement to safeguard young shoppers in this evolving e-commerce landscape?

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, particularly when it comes to protecting young, impressionable consumers.

Challenges of age verification

Age verification remains perhaps the most significant challenge for e-commerce platforms. While many sites, such as Etsy and eBay, require users to be at least 18 years old, and social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram have a minimum age requirement of 13, these measures are often self-reported and easily bypassed.

“Most platforms don’t require government-issued identification for user sign-ups due to data privacy concerns and clunkiness of the user experience,” explains Alex.

“These concerns are valid; however, platforms still need to be intentional about how they’re designing for safety in mind once a user – particularly a young one – gets on the platform.”



Eliot's perspective

AGE 14

Once someone is describing a product and telling you about it, you assume they've been paid to do that.

On YouTube, they also often don't hide if it's a paid advertisement.

Influencers have a relationship with their viewers, so they have an incentive to tell the truth.

Yes, they're being paid, but if the product's bad they won't show it. I recently watched a video about an electric guitar I was interested in. The influencer said he was paid by the company to promote it, but instead he explained how bad it was and told people not to buy it.

I've never been targeted with inappropriate things.

I mainly shop for guitar stuff, video games, outdoor/hiking gear and AirSoft guns, which I play with with my friends. All the videos I've seen are very clear about responsible use and age limits. The most inappropriate thing, I suppose, is that in the comments people sometimes post links to that guy Andrew Tate, but I don't click.

Eliot's parents' perspective

I'm not sure if my kid is targeted with inappropriate products.

They are pretty responsible, but I'm not very internet savvy, so I'm not fully aware of what they're being targeted with. I trust their judgment and don't worry too much about them being influenced by something inappropriate.

There should be more basic internet controls that parents can easily opt into when they get their internet service.

Instead of blaming parents for not setting up controls, there should be an option to click a button confirming you have a child under 18, which would then set all the necessary controls, block inappropriate websites and restrict e-commerce. Internet providers should take more responsibility, especially for harmful content like pro-eating disorder or pro-suicide sites.

I don't trust platforms to have measures in place to protect young shoppers.

I don't trust retailers to implement safety measures that might conflict with their financial interests.

I do think there are a lot of positives to children being able to shop online.

Platforms like eBay and Amazon can help kids become more aware of where products come from, tracking shipments, and understanding shipping costs. It's a useful skill to develop, particularly since everything is moving towards online shopping.

SAFETY TRENDS IN E-COMMERCE

The diffusion of e-commerce throughout our online lives adds to the complexity. Here, Vaishnavi J, founder of VYS, and former Head of Youth Policy at Meta, notes three youth safety trends in the current e-commerce landscape:

01

Young shoppers are coming online at a faster pace than any previous generation.

Large, established e-commerce platforms are increasingly having to think about how they manage youth consumers. “More than half of all teens in the US say that Amazon is their favorite e-commerce site. That’s not a situation Amazon always had to contend with.

“Ulta and Sephora are the most popular beauty destinations for teenage girls and Apple Pay and Venmo are the most popular payment apps. These large e-commerce platforms are suddenly having to think about how to build for young consumers.”

02

It’s about the journey, not just the point of sale.

The rise of the youth demographic and the proliferation of UGC has transformed e-commerce.



“Non-product content such as social media links, or interactive content like Instagram Reels, TikTok, Pinterest and so on, creates this sense of excitement and interest around brands and e-commerce, which then sustains that shopping pattern,” suggests Vaishnavi.

“When we think about e-commerce, it’s tempting to think just about the site where the sale is taking place, but it’s actually connected to the advertising brand influencer space that’s happening off-platform, on another site altogether.”

03

A holistic view of brand safety is probably needed.

Vaishnavi highlights two ways that brand safety and brand identity are evolving: “First, a company’s brand follows it everywhere, even off its platform. Brands that are using their voice to advocate for important causes are getting the largest amount of ‘stickiness’ with youth consumers or their parents.

“Second, creators are their own brands, and don’t have to be loyal to one platform. That explodes the realm of people and entities you have to be thinking about in relation to youth safety.”

Frankie's perspective

AGE 14

I'm aware of being 'influenced' by ads on TikTok and Instagram.

That's the point! I don't watch influencers, though, and I don't watch regular TV that much. We're on the internet more, so that's where we see the advertising.

I don't think I've been targeted to buy anything inappropriate.

I'm aware certain make-up and skincare is not good for my age and there are some things I can't afford to buy.

Frankie's mother's perspective

I'm aware of the make-up/beauty industry and how ads felt targeted to the wrong audience. I had to stop Frankie using hyaluronic acid as she had no idea what it meant and I've found that very difficult to keep up with.

I think Frankie watches people her own age making what seems like quite innocent content but in actual fact she is being influenced by that. She thinks she isn't, but will then want to try their ideas and the products they use – and that is ultimately what an influencer is.

There probably isn't enough of the right education.

Like everything in life, why would you want to be told what to do when you're a teenager! You're also more likely to be intrigued by anything that you're told not to like.

I think more young people need to be engaged in talking to each other about this issue, empowering other children to recognise the warning signs. Older people talking to younger people about their experiences of social media will never have the same impact.

I worry about the amount of exposure there is to online advertising and how instant it is for purchasing. But ultimately that will work itself out one way or another. Hopefully children will be more digitally savvy and financially aware from a younger age... we can but hope! One thing I have noticed is how aware Frankie is about whether she can get something cheaper elsewhere. I took pricing much more at face value when I was being sold things growing up. The internet makes comparative shopping that much easier. It rewards users for not always buying from the first vendor.

Understanding the psychology of influence on young shoppers

Online influencers wield significant power over young people's purchasing habits, a phenomenon rooted in several psychological factors. Approximately [44% of Gen Z-ers have bought a product based on an influencer's recommendation](#), while a third of the same group say they bought something they didn't know existed because of an influencer's recommendation.

Why are young people more susceptible? Adolescents and tweens, in particular, are at a developmental stage where they are forming their identities and are highly impressionable.

Social proof and peer influence

Young people often look to influencers for social proof – validating their choices based on what is popular or endorsed by those they admire. This aligns with the psychological principle of peer influence.

Emotional connection and trust

Influencers often share personal stories and behind-the-scenes content, fostering a sense of intimacy and trust with their audience.

Young followers may feel a personal connection with influencers, perceiving their recommendations as genuine advice from a friend rather than a commercial advertisement.

FOMO (Fear of Missing Out)

FOMO is another potent psychological driver. Limited-time offers, exclusive deals, and trending products promoted by influencers can create a sense of urgency.

Cognitive biases and heuristics

Young people are also more prone to cognitive biases and heuristics – mental shortcuts that simplify decision-making. Influencers often leverage these biases through attractive visuals, engaging narratives, and social validation cues, making products seem more appealing and easier to purchase without thorough deliberation.



ACTIONS FOR PLATFORMS

To effectively manage the challenges and protect young shoppers, platforms must develop and enforce comprehensive youth policies that prioritize child safety. This includes designing more restrictive settings, implementing parental controls, and maintaining high standards for advertisers and content creators.

E-commerce platforms face the challenge of adhering to an array of laws and regulations involving consumer protection, data privacy, and intellectual property rights.

The rise of generative AI has exacerbated existing challenges by enabling fraudsters to create convincing fake listings and reviews on a massive scale.

What's more, e-commerce sites must contend with harmful and inappropriate products, such as adult items that are unsuitable for younger audiences, further complicating their content moderation efforts.

"Content moderation is key for e-commerce companies looking to keep their users and platforms safe and minimize these risks," says Alex. The most challenging aspect of moderating the e-commerce industry, however, is not necessarily content-related.



"The bigger challenge is conduct-related," explains Alex. "We tend to see a lot of fraud on the side of buyers and sellers, such as nefarious actors selling fake products or phishing for users' credit card information.

It requires us to conduct a risk review on the entity, look at payment, location, and behavior signals, and make risk-related determinations based upon those findings."

The current regulatory landscape for e-commerce is a topic of ongoing debate. Alex acknowledges that while there are regulations in place, they may not be sufficient to

address the rapid pace of technological advancements and the accompanying risks.

Faced with these challenges, what are the best practices that online platforms and other parties should adopt to manage youth interactions with e-commerce effectively? Vaishnavi offers some food for thought...

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PARENTAL CONTROLS FOR PURCHASES

The last line of defense in protecting young users, and arguably the most impactful, asserts Vaishnavi, is the introduction of parental controls for purchases at the point of sale: “Most large e-commerce platforms now offer that, and it’s incredibly valuable.”

She rightly cautions that parental controls only come into effect at the stage where the user clicks a link to buy a product: “They don’t address the user experience up to that point — the brand relationships they were building, the loyalties they cultivated.

“One platform may require parental consent, which means you can’t purchase a product through that platform — but another platform might not. So children might find a way around it because you have this whole history of building a relationship.”

E-COMMERCE MODERATION AS A PIPELINE WITH SHARED ROLES

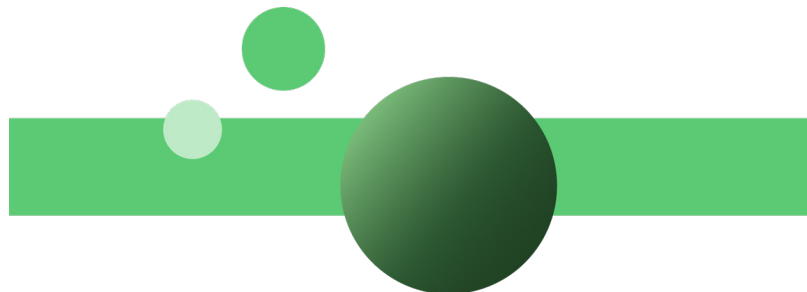
Parents have a pivotal role in moderating their children’s online shopping. But it’s more beneficial to consider safety issues as an ecosystem problem, where brands, social media companies and other ‘non-commerce’ platforms have a part to play, Vaishnavi suggests.

“We have a number of young people who are shopping online independently, with their parents’ cards and their parents’ full knowledge and consent — because parents can’t possibly be looking at every single purchase that a child is making across all these different apps. It’s time for an honest conversation about the bandwidth and willingness of parents to provide oversight.

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Governments, for example, can enforce regulations and policies that protect consumers, especially minors, from fraudulent and harmful practices. They can also collaborate with industry stakeholders to establish guidelines and standards for safer online environments. By doing so, governments ensure that all parties involved in e-commerce are held accountable and that the safety and privacy of young users are prioritized.

“Some of the most effective things I’ve seen have come through industry organizations and initiatives, such as [GARM](#) (Global Alliance for Responsible Media). They established a brand safety floor, which essentially said, these are the types of content against which we shouldn’t have ads appearing. That’s really valuable guidance for brands, and it’s valuable guidance for platforms that are looking to be more brand safe. Discontinuing these efforts will make it more difficult to have industry-wide standards on this type of content.” [Note: GARM suspended activity following a widely-criticized antitrust lawsuit from X, Elon Musk’s company, that has drained its resources.]

INFLUENCER TRANSPARENCY

The impact that content creators have on the purchasing habits of young people is significant. Our survey results underscore this, with 44% of parents saying their child is easily swayed by social media influencers.

“Creators have their own identity and people follow them across platforms without a second thought. They see them as their friends, as someone who looks just like them and is relatable, and that kind of loyalty is hard to disrupt. That has significant repercussions for e-commerce,” says Vaishnavi.

A largely unregulated creator e-commerce industry poses a problem. “If a creator on a social media platform can promote counterfeit products under the tag of ‘dupes’ or ‘replicas’ — both of which are really popular terms — and they are able to direct their teen viewers to a shopping link the e-commerce platform hasn’t yet detected, that’s a really hard thing to avoid.”

E-commerce platforms are doing their own proactive monitoring, but the solution requires a lot of cross-sector collaboration “that frankly isn’t there yet,” Vaishnavi adds.

It makes formulating and enforcing youth policies very difficult: “A lot of policies still focus on point of sale and the regulations around that. But when it comes to counterfeit or unsafe products, it’s difficult to follow that trail without a dedicated team with expertise in youth behaviors to support you.”

There is much work that needs to be done in the creator monetization space, but most tools that creators have at their disposal are voluntary, Vaishnavi says. “A lot of the incentive for creators to mark content as paid or sponsored actually comes from their audiences whose trust they don’t want to lose. But there is no real way to track if a creator is getting paid to promote something if they don’t disclose it. The onus should be on brands to check that the creators they’re entering into partnerships with have disclosed accordingly.”

UPDATED LAWS AND REGULATIONS FOR THE SOCIAL MARKETPLACE

Vaishnavi anticipates an increased consolidation of the creator economy as the next big problem to grapple with.

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VAISHNAVI J

“What’s interesting is that creators who amass loyalty are going to be able to take it anywhere, including, potentially, their own smaller communities – whether that’s setting up their own website or releasing videos independent of any platform.

“It’s already challenging when you’re looking at Amazon, Instagram and TikTok, but if you’re now looking at a variety of independent, creator-driven consumer brands, that is going to be hard to regulate. I’m excited for that as it represents democratization of this space, but it definitely brings its challenges.”

Regulation like the [EU’S Digital Services Act](#) (DSA) introduced a significant amount of protection for children and young people online, but “we now need to look at the lifecycle of creators on platforms, the trajectories that they travel in, and identify where we need better regulation,” Vaishnavi says.

“For example, we need more severe penalties for platforms or creators that are recommending counterfeit products which can also be dangerous and unsafe.

“There are existing laws that address counterfeits, monetization and brand sponsorship, but they haven’t been updated to reflect the digital reality that we’re living in.”

BUILD TRUST WITH YOUNG USERS TO REINFORCE YOUR BOTTOM LINE

Pursuing profit and investing in the safety of a platform are not mutually exclusive.

“Trust and safety has been a cost center for such a long time,” Vaishnavi points out, but when it comes to youth safety, it’s difficult to see it as just that.”

The responsibility of protecting consumers and the pursuit of revenue goals are typically positioned as oppositional forces, she underlines, “but what I think is different with the children’s market is that they are actually complementary. While teens spend a lot of time online shopping and have an enormous amount of spending power, their parents are a really important part of the equation.

“As soon as parents or children don’t feel safe on a platform, or have even one negative experience, it substantially affects their engagement, especially when money has been exchanged. Protecting children online is an important component of commercial success, just as brand safety is an important part of a company’s success.”



WebPurify is the leading content moderation service combining the power of AI and humans to protect communities and brands from the risks of user-generated content

Since 2007, we've been providing elegant, robust solutions that protect kids, online communities, and our clients' brands. Every day, we moderate 200 million text submissions, 1.2 million images, and 60,000 videos — for small businesses, to [one in seven Fortune 100 companies](#).

And because we believe that all websites and apps should be able to easily and quickly moderate their content, we offer custom-tailored [services](#) and solutions for all budgets.

All of our clients — from individual bloggers to Fortune 500 companies — get the same high-quality service and attention.

How WebPurify works with e-commerce platforms

"WebPurify uses advanced AI and custom live moderation services to weed out problematic content on e-commerce sites," explains Alex. "This includes the removal of harmful and inappropriate products for minors, such as drugs, weapons, weight-loss products, and more. We work with many of the largest e-commerce players in the world. We are appreciated for our high accuracy and productivity, as well as our consultative approach and commitment to excellence."