Child exposure to advertising on game websites in Brazil and Spain

Exposição infantil à publicidade em sites de jogos do Brasil e da Espanha

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Abstract *This article aims to confirm general information about the advertising pressure that affects children when using online game websites. To that end, we apply the theoretical and methodological framework of content analysis to a sample of game sites accessed by children from Brazil and Spain.*

Keywords: *Advertising; Internet; Children; Content Analysis*

Resumo *O presente artigo tem como objetivo confirmar dados gerais sobre a pressão publicitária que afeta as crianças ao brincarem em páginas de jogos na internet. Para alcançar tal objetivo, aplicamos os referenciais teórico-metodológicos da análise de conteúdo em uma amostra de sites de jogos acessados por um grupo de crianças do Brasil e da Espanha.*

Palavras-chave: *Publicidade; Internet; Criança; Análise de Conteúdo*

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Introduction

Considering the influence of mass media and information technology on the changes in children's play in recent decades, it is important to understand play culture in the current context of electronic and digital media. Among the many elements of contemporary play culture, electronic games (EG) stand out as a relevant trend in the act of playing, resulting from the historical and cultural reality to which children are currently exposed.

Technological advances, the new routines of society and increased urban violence, which has affected children's access to public play areas, are some of the factors that contribute to changing the current play culture. Against this backdrop of change, EGs have become a common form of entertainment among children and the internet is an important tool for this generation. Macro-level analyses confirm the penetration of new technology and EGs into the practices of American (KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION, 2010), European (EU KIDS ONLINE, 2010) and Brazilian children (TIC KIDS ONLINE, 2013).

Among the many existing media and possibilities for playing EGs, this article focuses on games hosted on internet servers. The choice to study online games is justified by the fact that the worldwide web is increasingly being used by children. Surfing the net has instilled a sense of freedom in young people that contrasts with the traditional control exercised by the family and schools.

Whereas on the one hand EGs are enjoyable tools that children play with, it cannot be forgotten that the growing number of users and generation of billions of dollars a year mean that, in addition to being a fun-filled activity, EGs have also become an excellent vehicle for advertising.

As advertising platforms alone, in 2009 EGs accumulated USD 823 million in the United States (PURO MARKETING, 2010). In Brazil, the combination between video games and advertising known as advergames generated USD 3 billion in 2011 (CAMPI, 2012). In Spain, EUR 27.9 million was spent on promotional games in 2012 (INFOADEX, 2013).

Against this backdrop of a childhood permeated by mass media and new technology, child protection emerges as an ongoing issue and is a particularly sensitive and complex topic. Concern over promoting children's rights in media and new technology is a recent global phenomenon that has grown more rapidly in some regions than in others.

Media, in conjunction with the action of governments and institutions such as schools, families, the church, etc., play a vital role in promoting and disseminating culture in our society. Advertising in particular is one of the most recurring forms of communication and as such, should not be ignored. Our daily lives are invaded by countless advertisements that, by selling products and services, contribute to outlining values that shape our culture (ÁNGELES, 2001).

Precisely because advertising is an increasingly important and influential activity, several initiatives have been employed to protect children from its effects. In Brazil and Spain there is still no specific regulation for advertising aimed at children. Debate on the issue is ongoing and a number of institutions are fighting to regulate children's advertising in these countries.

In this scenario, it seems fitting not to wait for legislation or commercial strategies by the entertainment industry to find out firsthand the advertising content of some of the game sites visited by Brazilian and Spanish children.

Globalization and the spread of technology and consumption practices advertise successful games in any country in the world. Mixed universes and standard profiles are proposed by the media and companies that perpetuate cultural industries in the gaming sector. As such, the present study focuses on advertising on Spanish and Brazilian game websites. The advertising content of game sites in the two countries was analyzed in order to compare and contrast Brazilian and Spanish scenarios.

Thus, the aim of this article is to confirm general data on the advertising pressure that affects Brazilian and Spanish children when playing games online. These data were collected in a previous study

(CRAVEIRO e RIOS, 2013) via interviews with Brazilian and Spanish children aged 9 to 11 years. To that end, we apply the theoretical and methodological framework of content analysis to a sample of game sites accessed by the same group of children previously studied.

Advertising parameters, characteristics and formats on children's game sites.

Technology had increased access to information and its portability and mobility have expanded the possibility of communicating with more people in various formats, from almost anywhere. Opportunities for interaction are also growing. Issues that were previously only news in traditional media are now the focus of opinions, comments, likes or trending topics on online social media.

EGs are part of this recent technocultural phenomenon.They emerged from the rise and development of computer mechanisms, the transformation of computers into a communication and media convergence apparatus. Electronic games became popular in the 1980s, emerging as significant social artifacts in the 1990s due to their social impact and the sales volume reached.

Advertising also underwent changes. As reported by Méndiz (2010), recent years have seen the implementation of interactive advertising, resulting in significant changes in the communication paradigm. This new interactive framework radically transformed the three fundamental points of the advertising concept, which had long been characterized by *one-way communication, separation between information and advertising, and persuasive intent*. In the new advertising paradigm, these three points were questioned and messages were primarily characterized as *two-way communication, hybridization between advertising and information*, and *enjoyable experiences*.

The relevant feature in the previous paradigm was the importance of brand presence. By contrast, ensuring consumers have an enjoyable experience is now more highly valued. More than merely searching for

information on a product, consumers want to identify with the brand advertised and enjoy a rewarding experience. It is this paradigm shift in advertising communication that consolidated the advergame format, a combination of the words advertising and videogame. Together with contextual advertising and sponsorship, this advertising-oriented game stands out from traditional formats used during the golden age of television.

Advergames differ from product placement, another alternative offer by brands that advertise in EGs already widely used in films and television shows. Although both concepts use EGs to disseminate advertising messages, in advergames the game is developed according to the communication needs of a specific brand and aims to create an enjoyable experience for potential consumers, whereas in product placement games are designed independently of the brand communication initiative, which is inserted after the game is created (MARTÍ and CURRÁS, 2012). Méndiz (2010) denominates product placement applied to electronic games as in-game advertising.

Another form of advertising considered a type of advergame can be found in virtual worlds and is referred to by Méndiz (2010) as virtual world advertising. The insertion of brands and real products into virtual worlds contribute to enhance the realism of these sites.

According to Martí (2010), the advantage of associating EGs with advertising is that amidst the saturation of traditional advertising media, EGs have important entertainment value that serves as a hook to attract consumers tired of unwelcome advertisements.

González, Francés (2009); Méndiz (2010) and previous studies point out that advergames can be an excellent tool for advertisers targeting children. Unlike conventional advertising formats that encourage a more passive and often unappealing relationship for children, advergames bring children into direct contact with the brand and allow greater interaction. Additionally, because children are typically frequent video game players and are already familiar with the language of EGs, they more easily identify with and form and affinity for the brands advertised.

Moreover, since children are newly entering the world of consumption, EGs can be used by advertisers as an important instrument to earn loyalty and educate children for consumption.

As such, companies interested in targeting children by advertising on game sites can use the following previously mentioned strategies to associate advertising and EGs:

- Advergame
- In-game advertising
- Virtual world advertising

They can also employ different forms of online advertising formats available in the market[3], including:

- Background: features in the background of the website
- Banner: horizontal space containing static content or not
- Button ads: rectangular with a space to display the advertiser's brand
- Classifieds: announcement similar to those in printed newspapers, listed by product category
- Interstitials: displayed before or after an expected content page for a set period of time
- Sponsored ads: association between a brand and a website to relate the content offered to the sponsor
- Pop-under: a window that appears behind the browser window
- Pop-up: a window that appears over the browser window, covering the content being accessed
- Skyscraper: similar to a banner, but vertically positioned with the advantage of not disappearing when users scroll down
- Slotting fee: displayed in specific place (top, middle or center of the page) with different formats
- Subsets: like skyscrapers they appear vertically on the page, but are taller and disappear when users scroll down

[3] Definitions of types of advertisements were based on studies by Brandão and Moraes (2004), Carniello and Assis (2009), Nordeste (2009) and Sebastião (2011).

- Superstitial: emerges over the content of a website for a set time. Unlike pop-ups, superstitials emerge in a layer over the content and not in a separate window

In this context of different strategies for advertising on online games, we believe it is relevant to study advertising content that targets young consumers of online games in order to measure and assess the advertising pressure they are exposed to.

Methodological procedures

This article analyzes advertising content on game sites visited by 20 Brazilian and 29 Spanish children aged 9 to 11 years old, previously observed and interviewed (CRAVEIRO and RIOS, 2013). In the previous investigation, semi-structured interviews were conducted (TRIVIÑOS, 1987) while the children played on their favorite online game sites in computer rooms at their schools. During the interview phase it was concluded that all the children studied were bothered by advertising on game sites and reported it was excessive, uninteresting and annoying as it appears in the middle of the screen and disrupts the game.

Following the process of listening to the interviewees comments, objections and suggestions regarding advertisements while playing online video games, the goal in the present study was to confirm the statements children made in the interviews to discover the type and amount of advertising that effectively impacts them while playing video games in their school computer room during an hour of free time.

The Spanish children accessed 11 different websites and the Brazilian children visited 9. These sites included virtual worlds, social media, portals and web pages that contain only one game.   Sites visited by only one child were excluded from analysis. Thus, the following gaming sites were analyzed:

- In Brazil:
  - www.clickjogos.uol.com.br
  - www.iguinho.ig.com.br
  - http://www.stardoll.com/br/

- ○ www.obaid.com.br
- ○ www.clubpenguin.com
- In Spain:
  - ○ www.juegosdechicas.com/
  - ○ www.juegosjuegos.com/
  - ○ www.habbo.es
  - ○ es.akinator.com/
  - ○ www.ciudadpixel.com.es
  - ○ www.clubpenguin.com

We used the methodological instruments of content analysis based on the proposals of Bardin (2004); Bauer, Gaskell and Allum (2004); Fonseca Júnior (2010); Piñuel Raigada (2002). One of the content analysis techniques applied was frequency analysis, which involves counting the frequency of certain encrypted characteristics in the material analyzed.

Techniques were selected to quantify presence, forms of presentation and frequency, according to the objective of this study, which was triangulated from the data observed based on the children's opinions for the subsequent inclusion in this study of the advertising content on online game sites.

The following aspects were considered in analysis:

a. *The origin of advertising distribution:* if displayed by the site or contextualized (sponsored) by Google while navigating.

b. *The position and space occupied by adverts on the screen:* if located at the top, bottom, middle, sides of the screen, over or behind the browser.

c. *The format of advertisements,* identified according to the advertising terminology described in the previous section.

d. *The global or national nature of the brands advertised.*

e. *The level of interaction that advertisements allow or request from the user:* low (only seeing the advert), medium (one click to move to another page, watch a video etc.) or high (involves the consumer in an experience with the brand).

f. *The general or targeted nature of the adverts.*

Advertising on Brazilian and Spanish game sites

The analysis enabled us to compile an overview of the adverts displayed on the game sites accessed by children in Brazil and Spain, indicating that the entertainment-based spaces of online games are permeated by a significant amount of advertising. The concrete field of advertisements analyzed consists of 158 adverts on Spanish sites and 126 on Brazilian websites.

As shown in Graph 1, the amount of own advertising on Brazilian websites is higher when compared to Spanish ones, where advertising is more commonly contextualized by Google as users navigate.
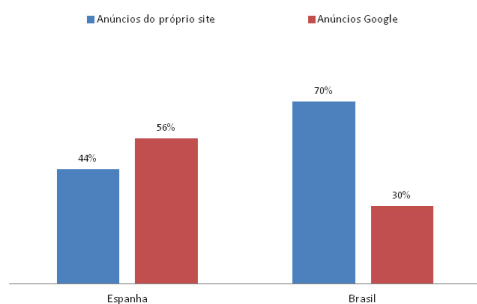

Graph 1: Advertisement distribution
Source: compiled by the authors.

Data analysis revealed a higher number of adverts and personalization level in content accessed by Spanish children than that viewed by Brazilian children. The reduced presence of advertising on Brazilian game sites has the advantage of assuming direct accesses generated and charged by the sites themselves and not dependent on mediation by Google.

With respect to the position and space occupied by the adverts analyzed, graphs 2 and 3 indicate that a central position on the screen is the predominant advertising tactic, essentially forcing children to acknowledge the advertisement on both Brazilian and Spanish sites. The sample of adverts displayed on the side of the screen is clearly smaller. Thus, advertisements ultimately hamper navigation and the visualization of

web page content, justifying children's aversion to advertising on these types of sites[4].
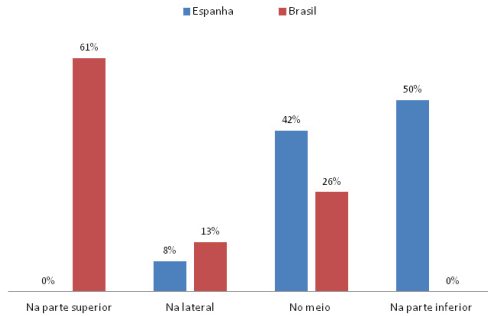
Graph 2: Placement of Google ads on the screen
Source: compiled by the authors.
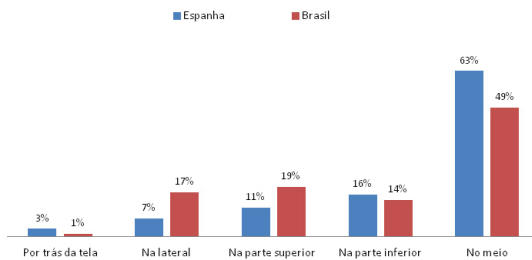
Graph 3: Placement of own adverts on the screen
Source: compiled by the authors.

In relation to format, among adverts contextualized by Google, predominant forms were less intrusive, including banner ads (55% on Brazilian sites and 50% on Spanish ones), slotting fees (29% on Brazilian web pages and 25% on Spanish ones) and subsets, which were only more common on Spanish websites (25%).

[4] The opinions of Brazilian and Spanish children regarding advertising on online game sites can be found in the article published in *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*, available at: <http://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/ESMP/article/view/42136/40115>

As shown in the table below, the formats that children found most annoying (pop-ups, interstitials and superstitials)[5] because they appear in the middle of the screen and disrupt the game did not feature among Google-sponsored ads.

TIPOS DE ANÚNCIOS	BRASIL	ESPANHA
Banner	55%	50%
Classificados	13%	0%
Slotting fee	29%	25%
Subset	3%	25%

Table 1: Types of Google ads
Source: compiled by the authors.

The table below indicates that, of the advertising displayed by game sites, both intrusive formats and those considered less annoying by the participants were observed. Considering pop-unders, interstitials and superstitials, 24% of adverts on Spanish sites are intrusive, reaching 19% on Brazilian websites.

Based on these data, it can be concluded that only half of the advertisements are displayed in formats that delay and/or disrupt visualization of the game.

TIPOS DE ANÚNCIOS	BRASIL	ESPANHA
Advergame	1%	0%
Background	8%	1%
Banner	35%	10%
Botão	9%	12%
Intersticial	4%	0%
Patrocinio	0%	4%
Pop-under	1%	3%
Pop-up	0%	0%
Slotting fee	26%	26%
Subset	1%	1%
Supersticial	15%	24%
Virtual World Advertising	0%	19%

Table 2: Types of adverts on the sites
Source: compiled by the authors.

[5] Formats defined earlier on in the article, in the section entitled *Advertising parameters, characteristics and formats on children's game sites.*

The two tables shown above reveal that advergames were uncommon on Brazilian games sites and not used at all on Spanish sites.

Figure 1 is an example of an advergame displayed on the *Click Jogos* portal advertising Ades fruit juice. It enables users to experience the brand through a game in which they are invited to overcome a number of challenges to rescue a box of juice. By using the advergame format, the Ades brand designed an ad that allowed greater interaction and took advantage of children's affinity for EGs, fostering greater identification among this audience.
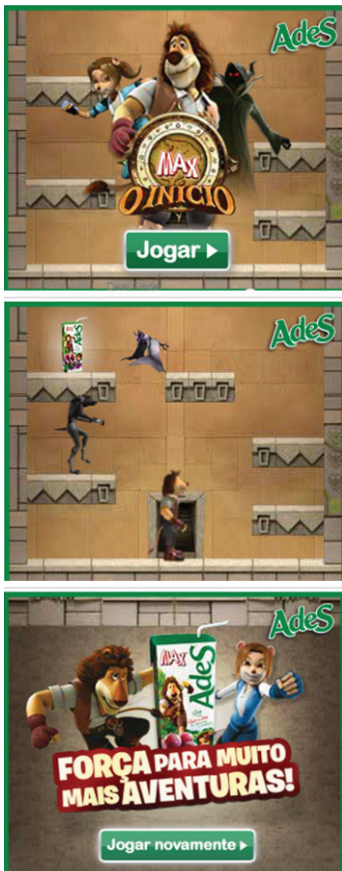

Figure 1: Example of an advergame
Source: www.clickjogos.com.br/

It is also noteworthy that the virtual world format is not used on Brazilian game sites and is only present in one fifth of Spanish sites, surpassed only by superstitials and slotting fees.
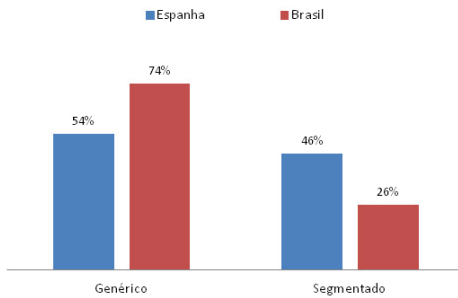
An example of virtual world advertising is the advertisement for Facebook displayed in the virtual world *Ciudad Pixel*. As shown in Figure 2, an entire room of the site was decorated with several objects depicting the Facebook logo, contributing to making the space more realistic and providing users with a brand experience.

Figure 2: Example of virtual world advertising
Source: www.ciudadpixel.org

Both advergames and virtual world advertising are more suited to the current advertising paradigm and tend to offer consumers a more enjoyable brand experience. Its absence on game sites fails to take advantage of the natural affinity young players may have with these formats.

In regard to the nature of the advertising analyzed, data presented in Graph 4 shows that despite the targeting opportunities provided by video games, surprisingly most of the ads on both Brazilian (74%) and Spanish sites (54%) were generic and did not target the children using the sites.

Graph 4: Nature of the ads
Source: compiled by the authors.

Virtual world advertising of Elma Chips brand's Cheetos cornmeal snack, displayed in the virtual world *Habbo*, is an example of advertising that targets children. Two vending machines were placed in rooms within the virtual world (Figure 3), simulating sale of the product. This advert follows the same line of communication for Cheetos applied in other media, using the playful image of its mascot, Chester Cheetah (Figure 4). Using the mascot makes communication with younger audiences more emotional, playful and appealing.

Figure 3: Advert for the
Elma Chips brand
Source: www.habbo.es

Figure 4: Chester Cheetah mascot
Source: www.brainstormbreakfast.wordpress.com

Another factor that can influence users' perception of advert appeal is the level of interaction it proposes. High-level interaction ads are more appealing than medium and low-level adverts because they engage consumers in a promotional activity that goes beyond the advert itself or an experience with the brand and/or product advertised.

A high level of interaction is present both in the advert depicted in Figure 4 and the live banner for the Frigo brand's *Calippo* freeze pop (Figure 5), displayed on the game site *Juegos de Chicas*. In addition to visualizing the advertising message, in this ad users are invited to share their experiences with the product by participating in a promotion that awards winner with a tablet.

Figure 5: Live banner
**Source:** www.juegosdechicas.com

Graph 5 shows that highly interactive ads are still not predominant on game sites in either of the countries studied.
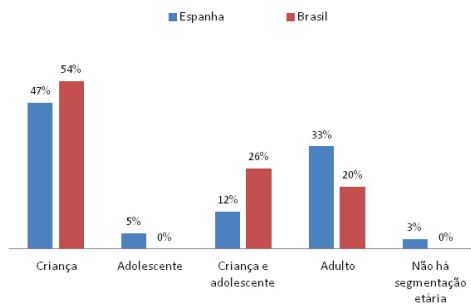
Graph 5: Interaction level of ads
Source: compiled by the authors.

Multinational advertising during the time participants spent playing video games was extensive. As shown in Graph 6, only 4% of the brands advertised during the assessment period were Spanish and 11% were Brazilian companies. Despite the predominance of international advertising in online children's games in both countries studied, in this sample Disney, Google and Apple were the only recurring brands in advertising in the two countries.
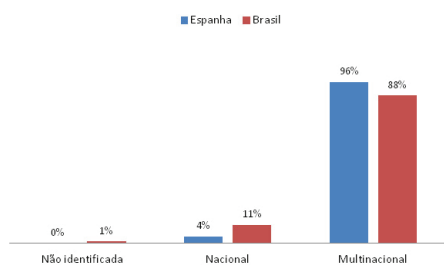
Graph 6: Nature of the brands advertised
Source: compiled by the authors.

Thus, it is confirmed that multinational advertisers fund the online games chosen by 9 to 11-year-old children during a gaming experiment conducted in Brazil and Spain.

Conclusions and findings

The study found that, when playing online video games, Brazilian and Spanish children who participated in the investigation were exposed to a significant amount of advertising promoting a variety of products, which are not always appropriate for their age.   This indicates a level of advertising saturation comparable to television.

Thus, if there is concern over excessive advertising on television, it is expected that equal attention be given to game sites that repeatedly interrupt and delay children's online playing experience with adverts.

As demonstrated in the previous section, adverts can appear in any area of the screen, often during games and even in game format

(advergames). The issue of not having a specific, designated location for ads on websites can be interpreted as a persuasive strategy for child audiences. Moreover, these strategies can make it difficult for some children to understand the persuasive intent of adverts, especially among those with less developed critical analysis skills regarding advertising elements.

In light of the data presented, another consideration is the fact communication companies that design adverts for online game sites in Brazil and Spain are not taking full advantage of online advertising potential. It was found that most of the ads analyzed did not provide high-level interaction between the advertiser and the brand; did not prioritize formats that value an enjoyable brand experience for consumers; target messages at a generic audience and not specifically at children. These factors result in low identification and consequent rejection of advertising by many young consumers, as expressed by the children interviewed.

Nevertheless, although the adverts studied were not always presented in a way that appealed to children, most ensured their message could be easily absorbed by children and therefore impact their online play culture.

The analysis also revealed that virtual world games reproduced consumer society stereotypes[6], which are activated by the accumulation of virtual currency. Purchasing objects/accessories using virtual currency gives child users status through their avatars. In these types of scenarios it can be more difficult for children to recognize the advertising intent of statements or promotional aids available in the games.

It was also observed that most of the Spanish and Brazilian websites request personal information from child users. Supplying this information provides a richer game experience and enables more personalized advertising. The websites state whether or not they use children's information to target and personalize advertising through a privacy policy.

This document is extensive and uses technical language, making it difficult for children to access the information.

[6] Authors such as Baudrillard (1998) and Bauman (2007) argue that the postmodern society is a consumer society, whereby individuals are viewed as consumers. In this model, consumption is a standardized action that shapes individual relationships.

Digital recommendations and literacy for the critical use of media

Childhood is a time when children learn about and discover the world around them through play. Games can change over time, but continue to exist since, according to Borba (2007), games are not only reproduced over the years but are recreated based on new contributions by each generation's power to create, imagine and produce culture. Thus, this generation of children born during the internet era has gained a new arena where they can expand their play experiences. However, it is important to question whether the play-based purpose of online spaces such as game sites is being prioritized and respected.

There is no doubt that the internet offers a rich array of play alternatives and can provide younger users with different and enjoyable learning experiences. Playing online also gives children the opportunity to share their play experiences with other children without necessarily being in the same physical space. Provided their play-oriented purpose is respected, online games can be an interesting arena for children to exchange information.

However, it is also true that children are not always equipped to deal with advertise noise and other harmful effects of excessive or inappropriate advertising in technology and particularly on game sites.

In this respect, we argue that corporate systems of self-regulated advertising are not sufficient. The scenario studied indicates that regulation is needed at least to establish legal limits for advertising targeting children. In addition, schools and families should not ignore children's internet activity and function as mediators in their relationship with the internet, influencing the construction of children's perceptions of content on the worldwide web and its meaning.

Adult mediation should move beyond restricting the time children spend playing and/or using the advertising content displayed online. It remains necessary to develop media literacy competencies that establish acceptable levels of digital skills. In practice, it is important to provide early knowledge of the persuasive intent of adverts to enable children

to better defend themselves against advertising messages. Although current advertisements on games sites are not particularly appealing to children, the trend is that they will become more interactive and engaging, meaning children need to be equipped to counter their persuasive arguments.

Moreover, the use of ads to finance "free" space on the internet must adapt to the time and skills required for each game in order to ensure that advertising does not become an obstacle to online game playing. Quality advertising should respect children both as active subjects undergoing a dynamic transformation and as developing beings.

As such, encouraging critical reflection among children regarding online advertising will help them become conscious consumers of company products, aware of the persuasive artifacts used in ads and, as a result, consumers who demand quality advertising that respects them as individuals.

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