ALEX

CONSUMER CULTURE: TARGETED ADS

What is it?

Targeted advertisements are **digital phenomena** integral to modern marketing, which apply data-driven algorithms to collect and analyse users' online activity and then use this information to inform the type of ads a user is shown. In this sense, consumers are 'bombarded' with advertising which is tailored to their race, economic status, sex, age, generation, level of education, income level, and employment, or it focuses on satisfying consumer personality, attitude, opinion, lifestyle and interests.
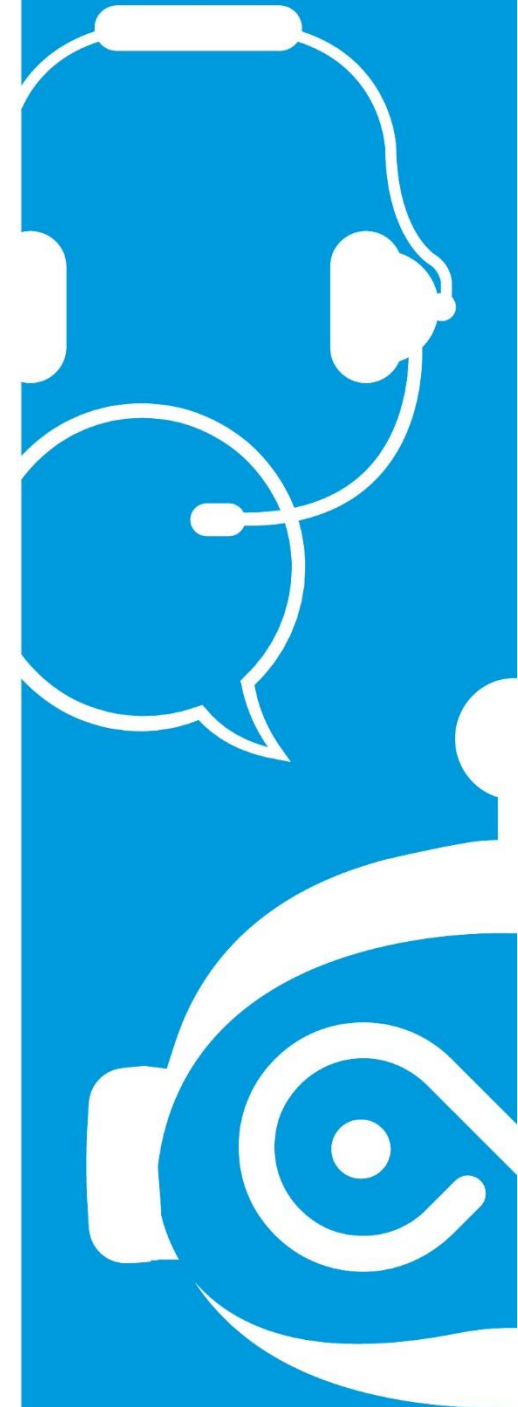
How can it impact the sexual and reproductive health of youth?

From the aspect of increasing awareness about certain topics that can affect the SRH of youth, targeted ads can be helpful for promoting positive behaviour through strong messaging. As such, they can both inform on matters of importance for youth and create a sense of responsibility for young people to take control of their SRH. It is of vital importance to understand that the differences between positive and harmful targeted advertising depend on the layout, the inclusiveness of the content and the message conveyed to the individual.

Therefore, the same profiling techniques used to empower youth can also be used to exploit users' vulnerabilities and display inappropriate advertisements. Targeted advertising can present an image that is a distortion of reality. Advertisements directed at teens can influence them because they are in the process of developing their sexual identity and their perception of sexuality is still in its infancy. As a result, hypersexualised images can give young people the wrong impression of what constitutes a healthy sexuality and interpersonal relationships.

These images can also have a direct impact on their self-confidence and perception of their own body or sexuality, exacerbating bad habits or emotional weaknesses. For instance, based on past behaviour a young person might be shown gimmicky weight loss products which may be counterproductive to nurturing a positive self-image. Relatedly, some advertisements present harmful "ideals" of body appearance, such as unhealthy body weights or musculatures. They can also convey racial biases among youth by promoting skin lightening, tanning or hair straightening products.
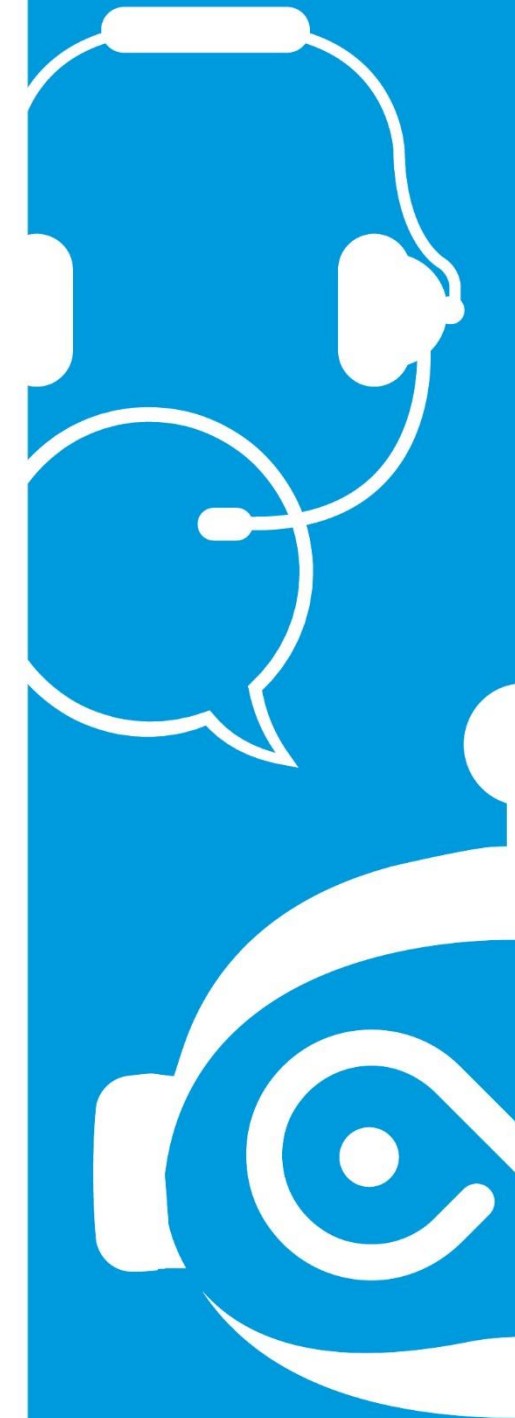
What are some ways in which youth can be supported?

- To safeguard against the potential harmful effects of ads which are omnipresent, educate youth on the existence of advertising campaigns that are more inclusive and present a more realistic view of 'reality'.

- Disable the use of cookies on devices used by youth. This functionality is useful for preventing the tracking of users and preventing ads' machine learning from remembering their preferences online.

- For those youth whose behaviour and self-image regarding their SRH has been negatively impacted by ads, assist them in improving their browsing experience by installing ad-avoidance technologies such as ad-blockers. Tools such as these eliminate the nuisance from advertisements.

Related digital phenomena/tools:

See sheets:

- Social media: Instagram
- Privacy: Setting privacy settings
- Consumer culture: Influencer marketing
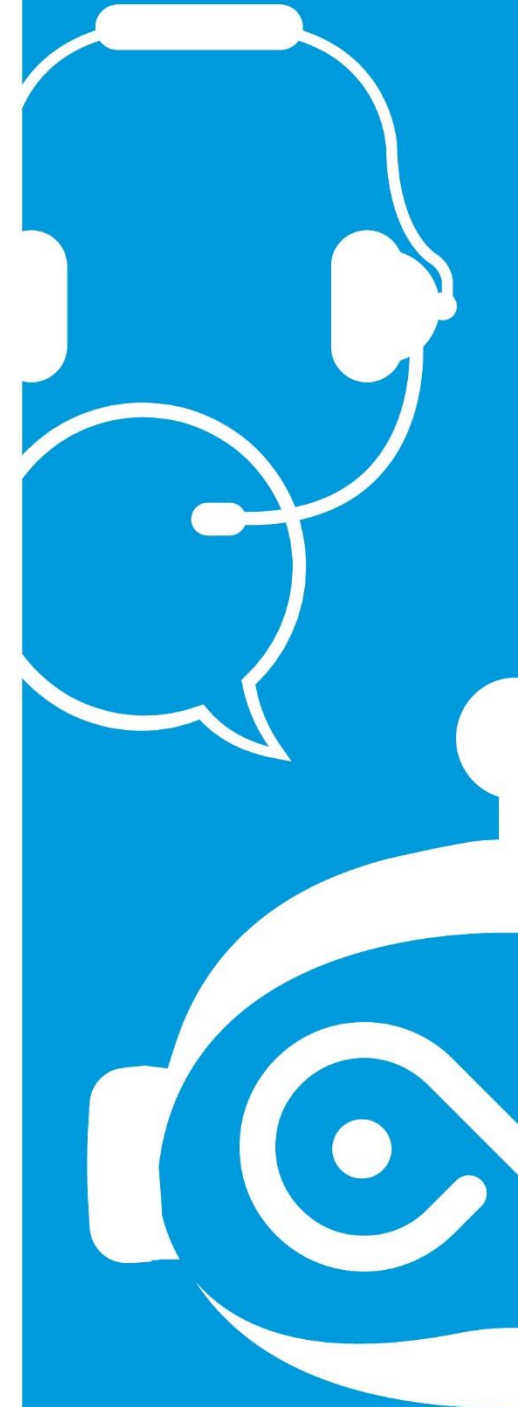
Further reading:

- Dontigney, Eric. "Cons of Advertising to Teenagers." Bizfluent, 2021. https://bizfluent.com/cons-of-advertising-to-teenagers.html.

- European Parliament. Directorate General for Internal Policies of the Union. *Online Advertising :The Impact of Targeted Advertising on Advertisers, Market Access and Consumer Choice.* LU: Publications Office, 2021. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2861/288740.

- Gongala, Sagari. "15 Positive & Negative Effects Of Advertisements On Children." MomJunction, January 5, 2016. https://www.momjunction.com/articles/negative-side-effects-of-advertising-on-your-children_00385891/.