

TikTok and the metaverse deal with controversy about young users

Article

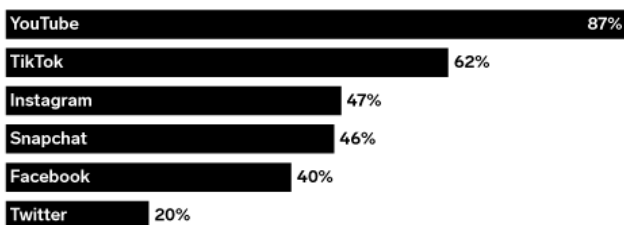
The news: The popularization of the metaverse and the rise of social media apps like **TikTok** have given marketers an opportunity to access young consumers like never before. But regulator scrutiny and concern about social media and advertising's impact on children has forced companies to adapt their practices—or risk intense backlash.

The worst of it: TikTok is a flash point in the discussion around the effect that advertising and social media have on children, and [recent reports](#) that link viral TikTok challenges to **the deaths of 15 children aged 12 or younger** in the last year and a half aren't helping matters.

- Following the death of a 10-year-old in Italy, the country's privacy watchdog ordered TikTok to remove any user that could not be verified as being over the age of 13, per Bloomberg. TikTok's trust and safety team found the child was on the app as much as **10 hours per day**—another factor that TikTok has [worked to reduce](#).
- It's not just TikTok: Last year, an internal **Instagram** report leaked showing the company was aware of the app's extreme adverse impact on underage users and teenage girls in particular, prompting regulator action and the suspension of planned app **Instagram for Kids**.
- Now TikTok is facing its own similar scandals, topped by concerns that the app is handing US user data over to Chinese authorities. In response, TikTok censored sensitive topics like weight loss for underage users and released [reports](#) trying to undo the narrative that viral challenges pose a major threat to teens.

Social Media Apps/Sites Used by UK Children, July 2022

% of respondents



Note: ages 8-17

Source: Office of Communications (Ofcom) - UK, "Children's Online User Ages Quantitative Research Study" conducted by Yonder Consulting, Oct 11, 2022

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Metaverse marketing targets children: Virtual platforms like **Fortnite** and **Roblox** emerged as popular advertising channels for brands looking to make inroads with young users, but they are still video games-first—and ones that serve an extremely young demographic.

- **SuperAwesome**, a subsidiary of Fortnite creator **Epic Games**, whose stated goal is to “deliver responsible youth digital marketing campaigns,” rolled out a product that lets parents authenticate their children's accounts and restrict certain behaviors.

- Through SuperAwesome, Epic games is trying to appease both brands and concerned parents in one fell swoop. Its rival metaverse platform Roblox is frequently the subject of concerns around its young userbase, from instances of [sexual exploitation](#) to exposes alleging that the company's virtual economy is powered by [underage labor](#).
- While many brand activations on Fortnite and Roblox are about building brand familiarity with young users for later on in their lives, there are also campaigns that are directly relevant to children, like Roblox and **Kids Foot Locker's** most recent activation.

Our take: Both TikTok and metaverse platforms will have to put effective systems in place to protect young users if they want to quell brand, parental, and regulator concerns about their places in advertising. Brands that partner with those platforms should take extra steps to ensure that their activations prioritize safety for young users.