

**Webinar on protecting children against pressuring techniques in digital media**

**UNCTAD informal Working group on consumer protection in e-commerce,  
May 15, 2025**

On 15 May 2025, UNCTAD's informal working group on consumer protection in e-commerce and the Swedish Consumer Agency co-organized the webinar on protecting children against pressuring techniques in digital media. The webinar brought together leading researchers, consumer protection authorities, and policy experts to discuss how digital marketing environments are influencing children's experiences and decision-making, and to explore appropriate regulatory responses. The event attracted over 70 participants from across the globe.

Ms. Valentina Rivas, the Programme Management Officer from UNCTAD's Competition and Consumer Policies Branch, opened the session, introduced the agenda and welcomed participants. Ms. Teresa Moreira, Head of the same branch, highlighted the importance of addressing manipulative techniques targeting children in digital media. She emphasized the role of international cooperation and the United Nations Guidelines on Consumer Protection, and invited participants to the upcoming United Nations conference on competition and consumer protection in July 2025 in Geneva.

Prof. Liselot Hudders from Ghent University, Belgium, was the first speaker and presented on *"From Likes to Lifestyle: How Social Media Fuels Youth Consumer Culture"*. She explored how video platforms are shaping children's values, worldviews, and consumer behaviour. While acknowledging the positive role of algorithms in delivering entertaining, creative, and educational content, and in fostering connection and inspiration, she also raised serious concerns about the commercial nature of these platforms, highlighting issues such as commercial manipulation, confirmation bias, and social pressure.

Prof. Hudders then shared research on the stages of consumer development and the emergence of kidfluencers. Her study with Flemish teenagers showed that children learn consumer skills from social media and often pass that knowledge on to their parents. She highlighted that the negative effects of kidfluencer content are often underestimated, as such videos frequently promote brand prominence and materialism, risky or regulated products, and unhealthy norms.

She concluded by calling for greater media literacy, critical thinking, and platform accountability, and ended her presentation with a strong appeal for collective action through education, responsible platform design, and regulatory attention to tackle these challenges together.

Prof. Hudders' presentation prompted active engagement from participants. Ms. Emy Gustavsson from the Swedish Consumer Agency asked what can trigger critical thinking in children on social

media. Prof. Hudders emphasized the need to teach children a “stop and think” reflex, encouraging them to pause and ask simple questions (e.g., “Why am I seeing this?”), which can help activate quick, low-effort critical thinking.

Ms. Rivas then inquired whether there are examples of influencers driving positive change in areas like sustainability or health. Prof. Hudders cited a successful anti-smoking campaign in Belgium, where government collaboration with influencers helped shift social norms and promote healthier behaviour among teenagers.

Participants also raised questions about how teenagers perceive and cope with “brain rot”, how authorities can support parents in addressing these risks, and whether legislation exists to limit children’s access to social media. In response, Prof. Hudders noted that while teenagers often show resilience and self-regulate harmful content, repeated exposure still has subconscious effects. She stressed that open dialogue between parents and children is more effective than restrictive rules. While some countries (particularly in Europe) have laws limiting underage access to social media, enforcement is difficult. Therefore, Prof. Hudders called for greater platform responsibility and support for digital literacy within families.

The second presentation on *“Protecting Children Against Pressuring Techniques in Digital Media”* was delivered by Ms. Emy Gustavsson and Ms. Cecilia Norlander from Swedish Consumer Agency. Ms. Gustavsson began by introducing the Consumer Protection Cooperation (CPC) Network, by all European Union consumer protection authorities, and highlighted its recent work on virtual in-game currencies. Using the examples of *Robux* and *V-Bucks*, she illustrated how such currencies reduce the consumer’s “pain of paying” and obscure price transparency. She emphasized that game developers often design spending loops and employ complex mechanisms that make it harder for players, especially children, to understand virtual costs, thereby undermining transparency and encouraging overspending.

Following this, Ms. Norlander outlined the CPC Network’s key principles for protecting consumers regarding virtual currencies. These key principles include: 1. Prices should be clearly and transparently indicated; 2. Practices that obscure the cost of in-game content or services should be avoided; 3. Consumers should not be forced to buy unwanted in-game currencies; 4. Pre-contractual information must be clear and comprehensible; 5. Consumers’ right of withdrawal must be respected; 6. Contractual terms should be fair and written in plain language; 7. Game design should consider the vulnerabilities of different consumer groups.

Ms. Norlander also noted that the CPC Network will continue to address challenges from virtual currencies and plans to host a workshop with the gaming industry in June. She added that legislative action may be needed, and that the European Commission is currently preparing a Digital Fairness Act to strengthen consumer protection in digital media, including video games.

The final presentation on “*Protecting young consumers in digital markets in Mexico*” was given by Ms. Gabriela Karem Loya Minero from Mexico’s Federal Consumer Protection Agency (Profeco). Ms. Loya first introduced Profeco’s areas of work and then shared a toll for educating children and parents through a national consumer magazine, which includes articles on topics such as grooming, cyberbullying, and responsible digital consumption. She also presented a video on cyberbullying to demonstrate how media and education can empower children to resist manipulation and support parents in their role as digital gatekeepers.

To conclude the session, Ms. Rivas summarised the key insights, highlighting that while children are active users of digital media, they remain vulnerable to commercial pressure. She also emphasized the need for regulation, education, and cross-sector collaboration to ensure safe and fair digital environments for young consumers. She then closed the webinar by thanking all speakers and participants for their valuable contributions.