

In September of 2019, Facebook declared that it would no longer show ads on any of its platforms that promote weight loss or diet products to users under the age of 18.¹ This decision comes from the desire to protect young, vulnerable minds from companies looking to capitalize on our societal desire to be thin. While this initiative is admirable, I can't help but wonder why Facebook decided to draw the line at 18-year olds. Have 20-year olds mastered the ability to deflect similarly targeted messages? Are 40-year olds immune from feeling insecure about their bodies? Why does hitting a certain age determine whether or not it is moral for companies to profit off of human vulnerability?

My 20 years of life have not trained me to scorn or ignore the dozens of weight loss and diet product ads that populate my social media feed. If anything, the more I age, the more I find myself giving in to the notion that losing weight will bring me happiness. This week on Instagram, I saw an advertisement for a diet product that promises to help me “De-bloat instantly”,² and for “Edible cookie dough that doesn't ruin progress”.³ I also noticed a couple ads for clothing, including one promoting a bikini.⁴ I wondered if Instagram purposefully packaged these ads together, deciding based on my browsing preferences that I might succumb to ads that reinforce a weight loss narrative.

I don't search for diet products or follow any weight loss accounts on Instagram, but I do search for healthy recipes on Pinterest and utilize at-home workout videos on the CorePower app. According to “Why Facebook Still Seems to Spy on You”, the fact that I haven't necessarily demonstrated health-centered browsing behavior on Instagram or Facebook doesn't matter, for it

¹ Cara Rosenbloom, “*Perspective | Instagram and Facebook Ban 'Miracle' Diet Posts, but There's Much More Work to Do*,” The Washington Post (WP Company, September 24, 2019), https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/instagram-and-facebook-ban-miracle-diet-posts-but-theres-much-more-work-to-do/2019/09/23/0829a872-de26-11e9-b199-f638bf2c340f_story.html.

² Ad Template, Row 20

³ Ad Template, Row 15

⁴ Ad Template, Row 18

is likely that Pinterest and CorePower have collected my personal browsing data and shared it with Facebook regardless.⁵ Evidently, these companies have banded together to show me ads that they believe I will click on.

They're correct. These targeted ads are accurate in the sense that they do appeal to me. However, I do not want them. I do not appreciate them. They feed a mindset that I wish to abandon by providing convenience where I crave disruption. On its own, Instagram is already filled with posts of thin, retouched people that remind me of the diet culture that society values. By adding targeted advertisements that further promote this, Facebook and Instagram cross the line between helpful and hurtful.

For this reason, Facebook should ban weight loss or diet product advertisements across all digital platforms, regardless of user age. Because Facebook controls 83% of social ad spending in the United States, prohibiting these types of ads would have a direct impact on millions of people.⁶ While it's important to acknowledge that the burden of transforming an entire societal mindset surrounding body image does not fall solely on Instagram or Facebook, these social media giants have an ethical responsibility to prioritize the mental health of their users over ad revenue.

⁵Katherine Bindley, "Why Facebook Still Seems to Spy on You," The Wall Street Journal (Dow Jones & Company, February 28, 2019), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-ads-will-follow-you-even-when-your-privacy-settings-are-dialed-up-11551362400>.

⁶ Greg Sterling Greg Sterling is a Contributing Editor to Search Engine Land, "Almost 70% of Digital Ad Spending Going to Google, Facebook, Amazon, Says Analyst Firm," Marketing Land, June 17, 2019, <https://marketingland.com/almost-70-of-digital-ad-spending-going-to-google-facebook-amazon-says-analyst-firm-262565>.