# EXCLUSIVE: Ads From Verizon, Shell, and Others Ran Next to Explicit Videos on Top Android App

Ads from major brands including Verizon, Amazon, and Popeyes ran next to sexually suggestive or racially offensive content on a popular short-form video platform XShorts, ADWEEK has confirmed.

At the time of writing, XShorts has over a million downloads and is the top app in the free entertainment category on the Google Play store. It describes itself on the Play store as a home for “short and hot videos” and outranks apps like Apple TV and Disney+.

The app has a ‘Teen’ rating, which, according to Google’s policies, indicates that it’s suitable for users aged 13 and up.

Following outreach from ADWEEK, Google determined that XShorts violates its policies and barred advertising on the app. In a statement, a Google spokesperson said: “We blocked the XShorts app’s ability to monetize.”

The tech giant is conducting additional reviews into XShorts.

A brief scroll on Tuesday surfaced a TikTok-like video feed of nearly nude women with sexually explicit captions, political humor, and racist memes—content that, an ADWEEK investigation found, was being funded by major brands.

At the time, banner ads appeared beneath videos as they played, and the platform also served full-screen interstitial

ads between videos. ADWEEK observed ads for Shell, Amazon’s Audible, Walgreens, Microsoft, and Popeyes appearing on the app during a span of about five minutes.

Additional screenshots produced by a source, who asked to remain anonymous, showed ads from Verizon, Starbucks, Roblox, Gatorade, Wayfair, Instacart, Square, and others. Many of these appeared alongside highly sexualized content.

Clicking the AdChoices info button on ads in XShorts reveals that many were served through popular ad servers including Epsilon, Facebook Audience Network, Amazon, AppLovin, Basis, inMobi, and Moloco.

In one period of use, the app displayed full-screen ads for the news outlet Puck, American Eagle Outfitters-owned Todd Snyder, and the clothing brand &SONS Trading Co—all of which were served via Meta’s ad server Facebook Audience Network, according to the AdChoices informational button.

Meanwhile, banner ads for many of the biggest brands—such as Verizon and Jeep—transacted through Epsilon.

A Roblox spokesperson said in a statement: “We have strict brand safety guidelines for our ads and have reached out to our ad suppliers to ensure our guidelines are continuously enforced, including immediately blocking this particular app.”

After being contacted by ADWEEK, Puck introduced new exclusions for this app’s keywords and other platforms. A spokesperson for the outlet said via email: “We’re looking into this further. Brand and platform safety are vital to Puck.”

A spokesperson for Todd Snyder said in a statement that the brand “does not advertise on adult-themed websites or platforms,” and noted that “the team is evaluating how any of

its advertisements may have been inadvertently displayed."

&SONS CMO James Cowdale told ADWEEK in an email that the brand's ads were served on the platform as a result of automated settings in Facebook Audience Network. He said: "These settings—common in Advantage+ campaigns and also in Google's Performance Max—distribute ads across a wide pool of third-party websites and apps to optimize performance. Unfortunately, these systems often offer limited transparency and make it difficult to proactively exclude certain categories or placements."

He added that the brand has "spent thousands with these platforms and were unaware that our ads could appear on sites like XShorts."

The &SONS team and its agency partners have implemented more stringent controls since being contacted by ADWEEK, but Cowdale called out transparency issues within Meta's interface, noting "even locating these exclusions within Meta's interface was not straightforward."

None of the other brands seen advertising on XShorts provided comments by press time.

A Meta spokesperson said in an email: "We have removed this app from Audience Network for violating our policies. We have strict policies publishers must follow to place ads into their apps."

Mark McEachran, a vp of product at Basis said in an email that XShorts is "a relatively new app…whose inventory is available on many SSPs."

He noted that although the user-generated content on the platform includes adult content, XShorts went undetected because it was not flagged as an adult content platform.

"We have now blocked its inventory from our system," McEachran

said, “and have reported it to Google for violating its developer policy.”

He added that “the vast majority of inventory bought through Basis is brand safe and we have a strong track record of working only with suppliers that provide appropriate inventory for our clients.”

InMobi shared McEachran’s concern about the app’s ‘Teen’ categorization in the Google Play store. A spokesperson for for the adtech company said the company uses “publicly available indicators—including App Store and Google Play classifications—to assess the nature of an app’s content for the pre-approval stage.” They added that inMobi has “flagged this and marked all content from XShorts as mature.”

A Moloco spokesperson pointed to its brand safety policy and said the company “cannot comment on this specific incident.”

Both Epsilon and AppLovin declined to comment. Other ad servers seen transacting on XShorts, including Amazon and inMobi did not respond by press time.

For advertisers, getting brand safety right can be extremely complicated.

“This whole ecosystem is sort of like the subprime mortgage thing, where there’s really bad inventory repackaged with high quality inventory, and they say, ‘It’s good inventory!’” the source said.

It can also be difficult to monitor where ads run as emerging platforms and sites gain popularity.

“There are so many things to keep on top of as new properties arise, as with XShorts,” said Neal Thurman, cofounder of the Brand Safety Institute and the director of the industry group the Coalition for Better Ads. He noted that because there are so many social media and ad platforms, marketers and agencies

have to manage many settings to make sure campaigns only run in brand-safe environments.

ADWEEK was unable to determine whether the advertisers on XShorts use third-party brand safety tools like those provided by DoubleVerify and Integral Ad Science for pre- or post-bid filtration.

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