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Media literacy and Marketing Consumerism Focused on Children

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Abstract

The paper points out the importance of developing media literacy with children, who are more and more becoming the focus of contemporary marketing. The aim of these marketing efforts is to put more pressure on children's parents in order to influence their decision-making process and shopping behaviour towards buying the products being advertised. The study is divided into three parts. The first part is focused on marketing targeted at children, whose cognitive ability to recognize the persuasive intent of advertising is not sufficient until the age of eight. Our views are based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Pursuant to this theory, we explain the development of consumer behaviour patterns among children, going through four developmental stages (from birth to the age of 12 and beyond). We point out that understanding commercial content depends on how mature the cognitive processes of an individual are. The same thing is essential for the development of consumer behaviour and for the ability to distinguish between commercialism and reality in advertisements. The second part of the paper deals with the negative impact of commercialization on children's development, as the high levels of materialism found in advertisements negatively influence children's self-esteem, value orientation, habits and attitudes. The third part of the paper emphasizes the importance of increasing media literacy both within families and in schools by means of media literacy education. Developing media literacy is just the thing that may help children understand marketing messages and so improve their ability to recognize commercial messages.

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1. Introduction

Realizing that children consumers have increasing powers and that their pressure on the shopping behavior of the parents increases with their age leads to a higher attention of marketing professionals to children consumers. Commercials are not delivered to children exclusively in traditional manner, but there are new marketing methods and

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media. Technologies always more and more utilized by various commercial companies. Moreover these marketing methods are applied within the school context, for instance by means of product placements in students' textbooks or corporate-sponsored educational materials, that even more urges for a bigger need for children development protection by parents and teachers.

Companies put an emphasis on the creation of positive associations with their products by affecting the emotions of the consumers, and work with the premise that by meeting the need (that is, by buying the product) the consumer can avoid the anxiety caused by its lack as well as meet her social needs (the need for love, belonging, respect, etc.) (Moschis & Churchill, 1979; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003). It is well-known that a wide range of brands is targeted at children, which stems from the idea that the earlier an individual becomes a loyal consumer, the longer the company will be able to influence her desires and preferences. That is why so many companies strive to take over what is called the children space, even though they offer products that are useless and unaffordable in their age (such as a *Ferrari car*).

The consumer behavior of children and youth is frequently studied as part of the paradigm dealing with consumer socialization (Ward, 1974), that is, a process in which the child adopts skills, knowledge, habits, competencies, and attitudes which are important for the role of a consumer. Scholarly literature does not provide a unified definition of consumer behavior. Different scholars agree, though, that a consumer is a person who (1) has some desires and preferences, (2) looks for ways of meeting them, (3) selects and shops, and (4) evaluates the product and its alternatives (Mowen & Minor, 1998). Particular attention is paid to the development of children's consumer behaviour, which is closely connected with the theories of cognitive development, based on J. Piaget's theory (e.g. Flavell, Miller & Miller, 2002; Valkenburg, 2000; McNeal, 2007; Nairn & Fine, 2008), with the development theories of interactive child-parent relationship (e.g. Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1990; Belk, 1988), marketing models (e.g. Acuff, 1997; McNeal, 1992), and the theories of the popularity of toys and ways of entertainment (Valkenburg, Cantor & Peeters, 2000). Our paper explains the development of consumer behaviour on the basis of the theories of cognitive development.

2. The Development of Child into a Consumer

Marketing targeted at children and the youth is well thought out and well developed. It focuses attention on how the learning process takes place and on how the child gradually develops his/her cognitive schemes. These schemes help him/her understand the world, including the world of commerce. The development of consumer behaviour is often explained using the theory of cognitive development, which specifies the correlation between an understanding of commercial content and the stages of cognitive development. Young children have difficulty distinguishing between commercialism and reality in advertisements, as understanding these two concepts depends on how mature their cognitive processes are.

Our paper deals with the development of children's consumer behaviour, based on the theories of cognitive development. One of the most commonly used theories in marketing research is Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory (1999). According to this theory, cognitive development, divided by the author into four stages (Piaget, 1999), is essential for the ability of an individual to decode advertising messages aimed at him/her.

The first of the four stages of cognitive development, the so-called **sensorimotor stage** (Piaget, 1999), is the stage in which children begin to make sense of the world through coordinating sensory perception and motor activities. The child learns how to understand the fact that s/he exists separately from the world around him/her and that this world exists even when s/he cannot perceive it (i.e. we are talking about the development of object permanence). At as early as four months of age, babies become interested in TV programmes (e.g. *Sesame Street*, *Teletubbies*, in Lemish, 1987; Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001). At the age of eighteen months, the child wants his/her parents to buy him/her certain products (McNeal, 1992), s/he can recognize various corporate logos (Schor, 2004), and is able to find the association between a TV commercial and the relevant product in the shop (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001). According to the conceptual model developed by Valkenburg & Cantor (2001), describing how children become consumers, the ages of 0 to 2 represent the stage in which wishes, desires and preferences emerge. However, in this developmental stage, these cannot yet be considered consumerism.

According to Piaget (1999), the second developmental stage begins when the symbolic function of language occurs in children. This stage is called the **pre-operational stage**. Researchers argue that children in the pre-operational stage of cognitive development (aged 2 to 7 years) do not distinguish between media reality and social reality. They do not understand the persuasive intent of advertising and believe that everything presented in the

media is true. In this developmental stage, the child does not understand that things can be seen from different points of view and is convinced that his/her point of view is the only one (the so-called egocentric thinking). The pre-operational stage is divided into two sub-stages – the symbolic function sub-stage (from 2 to 4 years of age) and the intuitive thought sub-stage (from 4 to 7 years of age). Children aged 2 to 4 can think in symbols and pictures. Imaginative play reaches its peak between the ages of 4 to 7. The child becomes an active media user preferring entertainment and adventure contents, visual objects, and also cartoon figures and animated cartoon figures, such as animals and children (Kirkorian, Wartella & Anderson, 2008; Acuff, 1997; Lemish, 2007). Taking account of consumer behaviour, we can now witness stubborn, angry and sulky behaviour in children (the so-called nag factor) as a way to make their parents buy them a given product in the shop (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001). The above-described behaviour is connected with the fact that the child realizes his/her existence as an individual having his/her own needs, wishes and desires. From a developmental point of view, this represents a natural developmental milestone, often labelled as the stage in which the child begins to act out his/her anger and rage (Šramová, 2007). The older children get, the more sophisticated ways of negotiating they acquire. And these ways play an important part both in family communication (Kuczyński & Kochanska, 1990) and in influencing family shopping (McNeal, 1992). Children themselves become shoppers independent of the presence of their parents while doing the shopping approximately at the age of 5 (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001).

The **concrete operational stage** (between the ages of 7 to 12) is the third stage of cognitive development (Piaget, 1999). It is the stage in which children's thinking develops and logical structures are created. These structures are visual, i.e. they are connected with particular objects. In this stage, the individual is able to distinguish between his/her own opinions and other people's opinions. However, his/her ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality is still inconstant. Therefore, the interpretation of content, including media content, is distorted. Nevertheless, compared to the previous developmental stage, his/her view of the world is now more realistic. S/he is highly critical of the entertainment and commercial contents lacking realism (Acuff, 1997), and is able to recognize over a hundred brands (Schor, 2004). His/her ability to distinguish commercial content in advertising is now much more sophisticated (John, 1999). S/he becomes an independent shopper and his/her materialism increases (Schor, 2004). Also, s/he feels attracted by real sporting and media heroes (Acuff, 1997). According to Lemish (2007), in this developmental stage, children lose interest in children's channels and become interested in family comedy, drama, quiz shows, reality TV, sports and music channels. Considering their social connections, we can notice increasing interactivity within their peer group, which starts to influence the child's consumer preferences and his/her views of what is "cool".

According to Piaget (1999), in the last stage of cognitive development, which is called the **formal operational stage** (beyond the age of 12), the individual is capable of working logically with symbols related to abstract concepts. S/he is able to understand the motives of advertisers and can be hypercritical of advertising (Calvert, 2008). It is not unusual for him/her to pay attention to social, political, ethical and ideological issues. Compared to the previous stage, this stage of cognitive development is characterized by strong materialism and identification with celebrities (Šramová, 2012), as well as by using interactive media to buy products (Chen & Cheng, 2009). Also, peer influence becomes more dominant as regards the individual's consumer behaviour, brand preference and brand loyalty (Šramová, Džupina & Jurášková, 2013).

Consumer behaviour continues to develop in adulthood as well. However, it is just the stages preceding adulthood that are considered the stepping stones to its further development. It is a period of time in which consumer opinions, desires, habits and behaviour can be significantly influenced.

3. The Negative Effects of Commercialization

Commercialization, based on consumerism as a way of life, is widely discussed in the media and is often criticized for its negative impact on consumers' way of life. Marketing offers the individual an idea implying that if s/he owns the products being presented and if s/he has a lot of them, s/he will be happy, content and attractive for others. However, this is just an illusion, as these values are not in direct relation to repeat purchasing or the accumulation of things. In this way, consumers spend a lot of time consuming things to the detriment of the activities of non-materialistic nature (e.g. spending time with the family, with friends, creating something, etc.).

Marketing activities resulting in an increase of commercialization are particularly criticized for the following reasons. Within these activities, manipulative ways of product and service presentation are used, developmental aspects are not respected, and children's naivety, imagination, curiosity and eagerness to increase material

consumption are taken advantage of. The parents and teachers are not well prepared for this process, which further increases the danger of the aforesaid influence, as noted by several authors (Schor, 2004; McNeal, 2007).

This is extremely apparent in post-communist countries, in which consumers could not build their consumer habits along with the gradual development of advertising. Neither were they prepared for the “invasion” of advertising after 1989, when the border was opened.

Commercialization begins in childhood and, according to the findings in Schor (2004), the commercialization of childhood is gender-sensitive. Scholars studying children’s development note that products targeted at boys promote aggressive and violent behavior and there is a risk of the development addiction (such as addiction to video-games). Girls are endangered by the distortion of body image, which can lead to dysfunctional eating habits, low self-esteem and self-assessment, the deterioration of social relations, and living discomfort (Ravitch & Viteritti, 2003; Schor, 2004; Šramová, 2010). Young people tend to be drawn into the adult world nowadays (Hellus, 2004; Vysekálová et al., 2011). According Postman (1994), we can see a “decline of childhood”, that is, the number of specifically children’s games and children’s clothes is decreasing, children are eroticized by commercials and clothing, the drug and alcohol abuse average age is falling, etc. (Saffer & Dhaval, 2005; Sargent et al., 2004). Shopping centers offering products for consumers are highly attractive for children and shopping centers are often compared to the architects of current, post-modern, consumption-oriented society. Children spend an increasing amount of time in stores and media environment and less time with their parents, friends, doing sports, personal communication, all of which has an adverse effect on the socialization process as well as their cognitive and moral development (Šramová, 2007). Pediatricians warn that obesity in children is on the rise. This is caused by the fact that children not only spend their free time inactively, but they also consume high-calorie foods and drinks with low nutritional value, which they buy being affected by catchy commercials (Calvert, 2008; The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). To achieve this, not only traditional methods are used in marketing. Also, those ways that are closer to children’s world of fantasy and playfulness are used. It is not unusual to see kids’ corners with toys particularly in fast food restaurants. Sometimes, children’s menus contain toys. Thus, this type of eating and drinking becomes attractive to children and unhealthy eating habits, which may continue into adulthood, are developed. As a result of new technology expansion (e.g. the expansion of the Internet and mobile phones), the commercialization of childhood has become even faster and easier to achieve. This is the reason why it is essential to teach children, both within families and in schools (as part of media literacy education), how to become responsible consumers.

4. Media Literacy and Consumer Behaviour

Media literacy, i.e. the ability of an individual to analyze, evaluate and create information for various types of the media by means of using different literary genres and forms, is one of the ways to protect children and the youth from the unfavourable impact of commercialization. Media literacy is the ability of an individual to understand how the mass media work, how they create and arrange their messages, and how these messages are then conveyed to their audiences. In schools, media literacy education primarily aims to gradually develop students’ critical thinking and media production skills, which are very useful for every individual living in the time of information technology expansion. On one hand, the individual is familiar with the way in which today’s media work as well as with the role that they play in society. On the other hand, s/he learns how to deal with the media, how to communicate with them, how to interpret the contents that they present, etc. (Hradiská, Brečka & Vybíral, 2009). In this way, media literacy provides the individual with skills allowing him/her to critically analyze media information, to use his/her creative potential when developing a media message, etc. Thus, s/he is able to critically evaluate media content, to actively choose among various media offers, and not only to passively receive the media content being offered.

Developing media literacy should be accompanied by the education leading to the development of consumer behaviour from early years, as children are exposed to advertising and marketing from birth. Therefore, an important part is played by the parents and their approach to their children’s demands related to buying products being advertised, though not being good for health, such as high-calorie foods with low nutritional value. The parents should not only choose such programmes that are suitable for children and monitor the time spent by the child in the media world (media consumption), but they should also watch the programmes along with their children, particularly if they have pre-school children. This enables the parents to discuss media content actively with their children, and so to help them understand media messages as well as to help them create their own views of media content. This particularly applies to creating views of the marketing activities aiming to increase consumption, leading to unhealthy lifestyles, etc. However, adopting restrictive measures, such as issuing a ban on commercials

aimed at children under the specified age (usually under the age of 12, Valkenburg, 2000), which are taken to protect children as consumers, cannot be considered sufficient unless both the parents and schools, as two most important socialization groups influencing children's development, get engaged in the given process.

5. Conclusion

Educating and training children in critical consumer behavior and in acquiring effective attitudes and skills related to consumer and shopping behavior (consumer socialization) is important, because companies with their "cradle-to-grave" strategies attempt to get to children as early as possible and gain their long-term loyalty. They make use of various means and ways (that do not necessarily respect developmental aspects and moral principles) in order to get as close to children as possible (e. g. schools, playgrounds). Increasing media literacy is one of the ways to help children make sense of marketing messages and so help them understand the persuasive intent of advertising and the techniques used in public relations. Understanding the media as an instrument helping individuals create their image of the world, though also distorting the image, should be one of the main aims in developing media literacy both within families and in schools.

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