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# Marketing And Media Communications Targeted To Children As Consumers

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## Abstract

Marketing and media communication targeted to children as consumers is recently a topic of discussion in order to increase children consumer protection. Considering that children and youth spend a lot of time in media environment (Multi-tasking process), it is important to map the environment, including both the traditional marketing communication ways (TV, radio, DVD, video-games) and the new methods that are increasingly being preferred by children and youth (e.g. product placement, viral marketing, guerilla marketing, internet and social network environment, interactive games and quizzes, commercial website entertainment). Children are referred to as primary target group in the given communication, that is, the advertised products are addressed to them, as well as secondary target group, that is, the products are addressed to other members of the family, but the message focuses upon children as they significantly influence the shopping process in the family. This marketing communication mix, which consists of advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations, uses both traditional as well as new tools and techniques which target the children's segment. In this paper, we focus on the traditional marketing techniques applied by the media environment (e.g. repetition, celebrity endorsements, and premiums) as well as new techniques emphasizing their application in educational practice.

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## 1. Introduction

The marketing and media communicators' interest in child consumers has been increasing lately. There are more reasons for this particular interest, however, we can consider the awareness of children's power of persuasion on their parents' buying behavior as a crucial one. Children and the youth, not being a strong and economically

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powerful group, are attractive for the marketers for their ability to convince and persuade their family environment. Their power of persuasion increases with the child's age, which even the marketing and media people realize. Their communication is more directed at the child consumer. For this aim, i.e. to convince the consumer about the importance of owning a particular product or service, traditional as well as new marketing communications means are used in which school environments are not excluded from the communication process. Quite the contrary. Therefore this study focuses on introducing individual marketing communication tools, on the application of the individual forms and ways that lead to increasing materialism in child consumers as well as to their loyalty to commercial brands. Educators, psychologists and sociologists highlight the negative consequences outcoming from supporting consumerism (Schor, 2004; Opree et al.; in press, Johnson & Young, 2003; Šramová, 2014) and they ask for restrictive policies regarding advertising aimed at children. The importance of the knowledge lies in acceptance of prevention and intervention strategies that will take child's and the youth's development peculiarities into account.

## **2. Marketing and media communications and the child consumer**

Marketing communications is a set of immediately operating activities that are of a mass, group and interpersonal character. Their aim is to achieve changes in knowledge, attitudes, behavior of a whole group in relation to a particular product or service (Hradiská & Letovancová, 2010). Lately, we have been witnessing an increasing interest of marketers in child consumers, resulting in the lay and professional public, politicians as well as academics' need for enhanced protection of children and the young. On one hand, it is necessary to analyze and exactly name the means used by the marketers in their practice, and on the other hand, it is necessary to be aware of how a child's cognitive apparatus processes stimuli, i.e. what the children ability to distinguish commercial content of marketing communiqué is. The necessity arises from the fact that children are spending more of their free time surrounded by the media, mainly by TV and the Internet (Izrael, 2013; Rideout, Foehr & Roberts, 2010) and an increasing number of advertisements containing a false idea that when a person increases their wealth, they will become more beautiful, favorite, happier and more content (Šramová, 2014). A child has the tendency to believe the presented message as they cannot distinguish a commercial content which results in reducing psychological well-being and enhances self-centeredness and possessiveness (Fournier & Richins, 1991; Kasser, Ryan, Couchman & Sheldon, 2004). Children do not perceive their personalities as important, they rather judge on how much they own (Sirgy et al., 2012). In this article we will deal with the essential components of marketing communications such as advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations and direct marketing (Kitchen, 1999) with the emphasis on their application in communication to the child consumer.

### *2.1 Advertising*

Advertising i.e. presentation of products and services to the general public, aims to inform, convince and remind an advertising message to the consumer (Vysekalová, 2009; Hradiská, 1998). In practice we encounter commercial as well as social advertisements with their task to draw our attention to urgent social problems (e.g. famine, wars, hatred, etc.). Benetton, a fashion brand, has well-known social advertising campaigns in which they present such global issues as the fight against AIDS, race intolerance, war, and so on. Commercial companies realize that through the means of global and social issues they can reinforce the brand value, as well as optimize their profits. Later we will describe which means are the most frequently used to attract, to be fast remembered and to create associations in a child consumer.

### *2.2 Sales promotion*

Sales promotion is a short-term, timeshare activity that utilizes stimuli for an immediate increase in products and services purchase (Tellis, 1998, Jurášková & Horňák et al., 2012). These stimuli are for example price discounts, coupons, contests, etc. that apply strong incentive appeals. They meet with a positive response in a child consumer mainly because they attack their natural naivety, credulity, their hobby in collecting things; in teenagers also the joy of saving some financial means.

### 2.3 Personal selling

Personal selling is regarded as one of the most effective at convincing, forming an opinion, building one's preferences for the offered product or service (Kitchen, 1999). Its effectiveness lies in a personal contact, in a two-way communication between the consumer and the vendor, in which the vendor may not only manage their communication based on the feedback they receive from the customer, but they also form long-term relationships with the customers. Children base their relationships to offered products on the popularity of a specific vendor. The preference of particular brands connected with their popularity is enhanced in personal selling and tends to persist into adulthood.

### 2.4 Public relations

Public relations is building of good relationships through maintaining favorable publicity (Kitchen, 1999). Favorable publicity reinforces good public meaning, reverses unpleasant reputation, word-of-mouth stories and events. Public relations involves in the communication with the media as well as in managing campaigns of a social dimension. We have lately been witnessing the application of social-responsible marketing realized by Cause-relating marketing (CRM), social marketing, as well as fundraising. Cause-relating marketing utilizes corporate philanthropy, sponsorship, various social-oriented events support, or strategic partnerships between commercial and non-profit organizations (Marconi, 2002). Social marketing is an effort to push forward certain socially desirable attitudes, values, ideas with the aim to improve the lifestyle of people and the society (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971; Weinreich, 1999) and is realized mainly by non-profit and governmental organizations. Fundraising is a professional, targeted, organizational and scheduled activity whose aim it is to search for donors, sponsors to obtain financial or other sources for the needs of non-profit organizations (Haibach, 1998). Social, environmental, ethical projects address many consumers including teenagers. This way of marketing communication is at the same time considered an appropriate form for building, enhancing ethical, esthetic and environmental perception of children and the youth (e.g. campaigns aimed at good behavior while driving, campaigns against smoking, alcohol, etc.). There is also a wide application of this within the educational environment. Not only the connection of commercial and educational environments for compiling educational materials, evaluating pupils' performance, a close link of the school with the practice are used, but also building of a good image of the school.

### 2.5 Direct marketing

Direct marketing focuses on building relations with customers (Kitchen, 1999) in a way through which it directs its advertising activities addressable onto specific segments (based on name, address, etc.), or onto non-addressable segments (e.g. leaflets, catalogues distributed to household mailboxes). Its application is enhanced by advanced IT technologies through which it is possible to segment as well as individualize consumer's wishes, needs and interests. All the above mentioned tools of the marketing mix, i.e. advertising, public relations, sales promotion, direct marketing (under specific conditions, i.e. also a personal selling when a video-camera is involved), may be utilized also within the Internet environment. *The Internet* is a particularly attractive medium for children and the youth as it provides interactivity and dynamics. Banners are often creatively designed so that they use animation for a product or service promotion, which becomes more attractive for children and their attention. Marketing and communication tools are more addressable, thereby the efficiency of the advert message increases, and at the same time the use of social media is coming to the forefront. Social media represent a specific Internet environment in which people communicate, create their own and share mutual contents. A large number of people are usually concentrated within social networks; they communicate and keep in touch on a daily basis, share their experience, experiences, and so on. Social network marketing is of a special significance, i.e. using social networks by companies for brand building, enhancing brand loyalty and for sharing their advertising campaigns. Marketers thus have the option to target a large audience group that is characterized by homogeneity, interactivity and by sharing contents. For marketing communication, social networks represent an option to spread advertising messages through unusual marketing forms such as buzzmarketing, viral marketing and Internet advertising. *Viral marketing* uses social

networks to promote goods or services through spreading texts, videos, images. Existing social networks in which people share information on products or services are used for this purpose. In viral marketing, the recipient of an advertising message becomes its distributor. Their significance lies mainly in the fact that distributing recommendations for buying a proven product has a great impact (i.e. addresses a vast number of potential consumers) and is low-cost. *Buzzmarketing* is a viral marketing technique that focuses on making commotion, buzz about a particular product, brand, company, event, etc., while applying elements of shock, novelty, entertainment, mystery, provocations. Another unusual way how to attract consumer's attention is the application of *Guerilla marketing*, i.e. a product or service promotion in an unconventional and innovative way in places where they are not expected by consumers, at minimum costs (Levinson & Godin, 1994). For children and the youth particularly, unconventional forms of presenting with a hidden commercial message, which is not detectable at first sight, are highly attractive. For this type of communication the Internet environment, where the youth spends most of their leisure time, serves particularly well. According to our findings obtained through a questionnaire method on a sample of teenagers attending grammar schools and secondary schools in the Slovak Republic (N=420, average age 17,75), 100% of them accesses the Internet at home, more than 90% of them on an everyday basis. Speaking about the frequency of the Internet use it showed that examined teenagers spend an average of 4,46 hours a day and 32,05 hours a week surfing the Internet. As the teenagers themselves stated, the Internet has become a common part of their everyday life and that they cannot imagine spending their free time without it. They do not access the Internet only through PCs, but also through their mobile phones, and the Internet thus becomes a daily companion without any limits in place of connection. It also showed that without the gender affiliation, teenagers use the Internet environment especially to satisfy their social needs in the form of keeping in touch through social networks, for downloading films and music, for obtaining information on news, for purchasing music carriers, fiction, products according to their interests. Companies use the Internet environment in a high extent for influencing consumers' attitudes. Some of them offer interactive games, quizzes for building the consumer's loyalty to the brand since childhood. At their teen age, viral marketing becomes a powerful means for influencing attitudes as at this period of their lives we can witness a strong social pressure of the peers on an individual preference for a certain brand. Another, lately frequently applied marketing technique coming to the forefront of consumers' attention is Product placement. It is a form of hidden advertising in which products, logos, brand names are placed in films, TV series, videogames, online games, entertaining shows and programs, music videos, etc. This type of a product presentation, except for the already mentioned hidden advertising, has an impact on consumer's preferences for a presented product, on creating consumer's familiarity with the product (Calvert, 2008). Calvert (2008) also draws the attention to another product placement type – websites where the sponsor's logo is placed and thus brand awareness is enhanced. The danger of the Internet environment consists also of the possibility to precisely analyze children and the youth's activities in this environment and thus use almost tailor-made persuasive marketing strategies directing to impact child consumers.

### **3. Consumer socialization by children**

In the next part of this article, we will briefly describe mental conditions and processes utilized by marketing communications within the media environment during consumer socialization, with the emphasis on development preferences of child consumers. In studying consumer behavior of a child, numerous authors rely on Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Piaget, 1999, Šramová, 2012, Šramová, 2014). The rate of the cognitive functions development explains the child's ability to understand marketing message; their ability to understand the selling intent of advertising (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001; Calvert, 2008; Šramová, 2014). Consumer socialization (Ward, 1974) is most often defined as a process in which a child adopts skills, knowledge, habits, competences, and attitudes that are important for their role as a consumer. To arouse an interest in a consumer, different means of a material form (e.g. strength of the stimulus, color, contrast, unconventionality, size, dynamics), emotional form (e.g. arousing love to animals), information form (e.g. providing interesting information on the offered product), value form (e.g. the product brings satisfaction of the need of security, love, social acceptance, etc.) are used for attracting attention. Commercial messages repeating are used to increase the ability to remember the message, to build awareness as well as to enhance the image of the brand. Repeating together with presenting the model behavior (i.e. a behavior presented as an accepted norm within a certain community) through one of the means used in social

learning of consumer behavior. Children audience is particularly sensitive to bright colors, loud music, and rapid changes in stimulation. Early in babies and toddlers (0-2 years old) it is possible to observe their interest in sounds, effects, animation, humour, female and children voices (Lemish, 2007). Likewise, a child is able to quickly remember a presented message especially of those advertisements where personification and animation is applied. It means when you give an inanimate object and/or phenomenon some human characteristic (e.g. such as in an advertisement for Bonduelle processed vegetables, in which little carrots, corns and peas “come into life and sing”); there are speaking animals (such as Azurit, the rabbit, promoting the Azurit fabric softener), etc. Pre-school children (3-6 years old) are attracted by messages with puppets, animation in comprehensible narratives (Lemish, 2007) as well as with fantasy elements (Šramová, 2007). In sales promotion, a bonus, i.e. added value to a purchased goods, is often attached. Very often this is a toy (e.g. a character from a Disney fairy-tale in a McDonald's Happy meal), or a coupon-/card-promoting collectibles, and so on. It is rather an effective method of effecting children desires, wishes and preferences. School-age children (7-12 years old) like messages, educational programs, sci-fi, as well as stories with heroes, human relationships. Popular TV series characters become their heroes and those who recommend certain products, as well as do celebrities who together with their peers influence brand preferences (e.g. Spider-man, Hannah Montana, David Beckham, etc.). Celebrity endorsement, when famous personalities are involved in advertising campaigns to promote a product or service, address children as well as adult audiences. The most common examples of celebrity endorsement are a promotion of cosmetic products, fashion wear, alcohol and motor vehicles. Dependence on a recommendation from a well-known show business or sports person (celebrity endorsement) may be observed even more in teenagers (12+) who prefer action scenes (in advertisements, programs and shows) and who appreciate utilitarian values while shopping on-line. Playing computer games and chatting on the Internet are their most preferred leisure activities, and by this fact teenagers become an easily accessible group for viral marketing and product placement. In the research observation of a brand impact on teenagers, a high rate of their dependence on brands occurs (Šramová, Džupina & Jurášková, 2013), especially that one relating to cosmetic products, electronics and clothing. At the same time this segment of consumers shows also a higher correlation between brand features and a teenager self-efficacy, which enhances manipulation of their attitudes to themselves as well as to their surroundings.

#### 4. Conclusion

Marketing communication uses besides the traditional media (especially television, radio broadcasting, press media), through which it comes to consumers' awareness, also the new media (the Internet, mobile phones, etc.). Through the development of IT technologies, companies come into the consumer's environment faster, more easily and often even less costly. To reach this, they apply various hidden forms such as for instance Product placement, viral marketing, guerrilla marketing, animations, and interactive games. These are sophisticated procedures that increase attractiveness of presented messages in the child consumer. An active approach of an individual to a consumer behavior appears to be one of the possible protective measures, except for legislation amendments. Such approach is referred to as consumer literacy, i.e. creating a critical consumer behavior in acquiring effective attitudes and skills focused on consumer and shopping behavior (Šramová, 2014). Increasing consumer literacy is often a part of media literacy which should become a part of the current educational process at schools as well as home environments. Its aim is to bring up an individual with a critical approach to media and marketing communications in a way that is not passive, but which make them an active recipient of media and marketing messages.

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