



THE IMPACT OF MASS-MEDIA ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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Abstract: *We note that nowadays the mass-media discourse influences the consumer behaviour of children and young people, more specifically, it is obvious that it has brought about changes in many fields (i.e., culture, economy, society etc.). Advertising messages which target consumers resulted in attitude and behaviour changes, due to new, specially designed marketing techniques and strategies aimed at reaching children and young people. The consumer behaviour of this type of audience has its own characteristics, and experts in this field have succeeded in defining its identity and in getting to know better the mechanisms which underlie the traits of the consumer behaviour. The literature in this field has mainly paid attention to the culture centred around the adult consumer attitude, but this situation is gradually changing under the influence of mass-media.*

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Marketing,
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1. Introduction

The product market targeting children and young people is extremely dynamic and creative, as this market segment is a very demanding one. The consumer behaviour of this type of audience has its own characteristics, and marketers have succeeded in defining its identity and in getting to know better the mechanisms which underlie the traits of the consumer behaviour. At the same time, experts wonder whether research aiming at identifying the consumer psychological profile of children and young people is ethical or it is a flagrant infringement on their rights. The treatment of companies towards this consumer market segment changed between 1890-1940, when society witnessed a change from a consumer who was never interviewed and who was entirely dependant on his/her parents' actions, to one who has a specific purchasing behaviour, structured and individualized, based on age and temperament profile types. The consumer profile of children in the pre-war period, as well as in the period between the two wars represents a radiography of the western society, which displayed age, race and sex differences. Advertisements used to feature white, male children, living in towns and cities; they were taken to be ideal children. Starting with the 30's, however, this standard image is no longer present in advertisements; it got supplanted by the image of children belonging to various environments and races. Mass-media, radio, magazines and children's literature turned the child into

a passive consumer, part of a worldwide phenomenon with a high turnover (Jacobson, L., 2004, p.97).

Much attention in the literature is paid to the consumer culture centred around the adults' attitude, however, in the 40's this trend has gradually changed, under the impact of films and publications which created new expectations. Thus, young people's culture became independent and this age segment turned into an audience which marketers have to obligatorily take into consideration. Nowadays, consumer behaviour among children and young people has its own traits. We can even acknowledge that this audience represents a distinct specific culture, which centers around the young people's dynamic and assertive personality.

2. Trends in the consumer behaviour of children and young people

Children's participation in the economic decisions in their families turn them into an important dynamic factor with a significant role in their group. Of course, the play played by children in the family group is in function of their age group and the skills they employ for the activities of the community.

Over time, the social perception of the child and his role in the family has changed. During the antique and medieval eras children were perceived as the heirs of the fortune owned by their families, that is why they actively contributed with their work to the economic

well-being of their family. With the advent of industrialization, the situation of children who work in factories, mines and in other fields became problematic because of the exploitation of their work and the benefits they adduced to their families. In the 20th century, children who work represent a serious offence to childhood. Ideally speaking, the role of the children inside their family was limited to offering gratification and pleasure to parents and to the members of the group ([Doyle R. M., 2009, p. 78]). In the postwar period the way children are perceived has changed: they have turned from vulnerable beings, entirely dependant on the actions of their family, to beings playing an important part in their group, and whose opinions are highly valued.

The consumer behaviour of children and young people is acquired from the family. Children learn how they must behave and what attitude they must adopt in the purchasing activities of their family. Experts think that children and young people are influenced in the decision-making and purchasing processes in which the family members are involved. The influence, however is not unidirectional, from parents to children, but family members influence each other and sometimes take purchasing decisions together, that is why researchers investigate their buying style, their preferences and the way in which purchasing takes place in families. Decisions are not taken at random by families: they are mainly determined by the cultural heredity (i.e., values, knowledge, habits and preferences) trasmitted in the family from grand-parents and parents to children. It is for that reason that the way consumers socialize is very important, as it explains the way in which the purchasing mechanism is activated and who its responsible agents are: family, teachers and mass-media (Khan, M., 2006, p.27).

Over time, consumer behaviour of children has changed because of their exposure to advertising messages. This phenomenon, which is typical of western countries manifest itself in the former communist countries too. The fall of the communist system meant an opening towards new economic perspectives, as well as the implemenation of western marketing strategies.

Specialists assume that „young people and children watch around 40.000 TV advertisements every year, two times more than what they used to watch in the 70's. Statistically, this figure represents 16% of the total of the visualizing time. Mobile phones and the websites they visit also contain advertisements. Advertisements accompany them at school as well.”[Lusted, M. A., 2009, p.15]. Most of the brands are advertised on banners, product packaging, video games, labels, monogrammes, the clothes children

wear at school etc. All day long, children are besieged and surrounded by advertisements. It is impossible for them to avoid or to ignore them. Advertisements have become a part of children's life. A large segment of the advertising industry focuses on children and young people, due to their extremely big purchasing power. In 2004, for instance, in the advertising industry 15 billion dollars were spent for advertisements specially designed for children and young people. [Jacobson, L., 2004, p.75]. A market survey showed that this segment of population spent more than 159 billion dollars in 2005 in the United States [Lusted, M. A., 2009, p.62].

Parents, are in turn influenced by children. They have expenses of other 188 billion dollars to satisfy their needs.

The phenomenon known under the name KAGOY (Kids Are Getting Older Younger) represents a consequence of mass-media and of the marketing strategies and it is due to the children and young people's massive exposure to advertisements. Researchers have noticed that young people and children get mature faster than the previous generations, namely, the generations of their parents and grand-parents. Nowadays, products which target children aged between 10 and 12 years 20-30 years ago were purchased by 16 year old teenagers. Today, toys and video games target younger children, more specifically the targeted groups are four years younger than the kids targeted in the past. More specifically, the group of 10 year-old children now play with products which were once purchased by the 14-year old group.

In the last decade, experts have identified a new group called „tween”; This group refer to an age group between children and teeangers, who have their own needs. The term *tween* refers precisely to the fact they are between the tween category of the kindergarten children and the teenagers category. The identification of this age category led to the a precise description of its needs and to the development of exclusively designed advertising messages for the tween category.

Marketers conduct research on the potential profile and mechanisms which underlie the purchasing drivers of young people and children, as Marcia Amidon Lusted puts it in *Advertising to children*. They identified four types of personalities and classified the way in which products must be presented to each type group. The four groups are: *edge*, *persuaders*, *followers* and *reflexives*.

Edges do not follow the rules, they like to invent and re-invent rules and things. They consider themselves different from the others and do not like to be like the rest of the children, that is why they do not belong to the general trend and do not wish to follow the fashion trends.

Edges like extreme sports, forbidden things, that is why they do not do their homework and always try new products. Experts take them to be „independent trendsetters” because of their talent of inventing new uses to old and new products and of appearing original and interesting in the eyes of others. [[Lusted, M. A., 2009, p.52].

Persuaders are the most important typology for the marketing field. *Persuaders* are followed by most of the children and they are extremely attractive for the marketing field because they are cool and pick up the latest fashion trend. They are admired by everybody and want to be in the centre of attention, that is why they wear fashionable clothes and buy the latest products, which everybody wants to have. *Persuaders* are followed by all the other types, except for edges. *Persuaders* are the most popular children in their age group and whatever they buy, followers and reflexives want to buy too.

Marketers are highly interested in this type, because of the big impact these children have on the other two types. They are considered trend leaders because their peers always follow them as regards the products they buy.

Followers represent the largest portion of kids, that is, those who want to be in the centre of attention and who want to be original and for this reason they follow the models whom they come across at school and on TV. *Followers* do not like to experience new things, they lack self-esteem and they are afraid of using new products, but as soon as these products are considered to be trendy they want to use them too. *Followers* represent the average kid, that is, the large majority of children and for this reason they are also interesting for mass marketers.

Reflexives are a particular type and are characterized by a lonely behaviour and by being socially isolated. *Reflexives* do not have enough self-esteem either and try to fit in with other groups and to make friends, but they are considered weird by their peers. As they do not socialize, their influence on their peers is minimal and marketers take them to be insignificant and tend to ignore them. [Lusted, M. A., 2009, p.34].

Experts in marketing and advertising noticed that young people and children are influenced in their purchasing behaviour by certain values, namely love, fear, humour, imagination and mastery. Researchers explain that *fear* and defeating fear in various trials is the core value of the video games; *imagination* and fantasy is necessary for strategic games and for the games which build virtual worlds; the *talent* and *mastery* is necessary to solve complex problems, which make kids be admired by the others; *humour*

represents one of the successful recipes art directors and tapescript writers employ in their movies for kids. It is also the reason why in these movies characters and adults do crazy things; *love* is the value which motivates the purchasing of dolls and plush stuffed toys [Lusted, M. A., 2009, p.45].

The following values, are taken by marketers to underlie three big purchasing motivations: the *mirror effect*, the *gaming ability* and *collection* value. The mirror effect refers to the mimetic behaviour of children and young people who want to be like adults, and consequently, they behave and dress in accordance with what they see in their families and in the mass-media messages. This specific behaviour of kids, together with the marketing and mass-media are considered to underlie the KAGOY phenomenon. The desire of children to imitate adults is speculated and taken over by marketing strategies, with visible results in terms of both turnover and consumer behaviour.

Children's pleasure of playing *games* is due to their age and it arises from their desire to compare their abilities with their peers' abilities. Experts know these desires well and it is for this reason that many games have precisely these characteristics, especially when it comes to video games, which perfectly respond to the children's desires by requiring them to make high scores or to beat levels.

Categories, typologies, motivations and many other techniques marketers use explain the various methods employed, especially the way in which mass-media construes its discourse. Advertising messages targeting kids and young people heavily rely on these techniques and methods in order to properly reach consumers.

3. Conclusions

The consumer behaviour of young and children has been influenced by various factors, namely cultural, economical and social factors. Each society establishes different relationships and hierarchies between its members, and we note that culture plays a crucial part in this process.

In the modern and contemporary period advertising messages have influenced consumer behaviour of children, as well as their social behaviour. Nowadays children are encouraged to be independent, assertive, dynamic and cool. These messages with which consumers are constantly beset brought about cultural changes and were regarded as a consumer phenomenon typical of the western society. However, this phenomenon now characterizes the former communist countries too. The fall of communism opened up new economic perspectives and witnessed the implementation of western marketing strategies.

The KAGOY (Kids Are Getting Older Younger) phenomenon is the result of children and young people's being exposed to advertising messages designed by mass-media and marketers. Behaviour changes are due to advertising messages having been construed taking into account age groups and the young people's interests, wishes and aspirations. This led to the identification of a new age group and of new interests, namely the „tween” group, which implicitly resulted in defining the needs of this age category in a very precise way and in designing advertising messages which exclusively target the *tween* category.

In the future, marketers and researchers in social sciences and media may identify new methods for attracting consumers. The products of the future will determine the way in which consumers will relate with each other, will react to them and will purchase them.

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