

# Children and Advertising: Issues in Consumer Socialization Process

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**Abstract**—Today advertising is actively penetrating into many spheres of our lives. We cannot imagine the existence of a lot of economic activities without advertising. That mostly concerns trade and services. Everyone of us should look better into the everyday communication and carefully consider the amount and the quality of the information we receive as well as its influence on our behaviour. Special attention should be paid to the young generation. Theoretical and practical research has proved the ever growing influence of information (especially the one contained in advertising) on a society; on its economics, culture, religion, politics and even people's private lives and behaviour. Children have plenty of free time and, therefore, see a lot of different advertising. Though education of children is in the hands of parents and schools, advertising makers and customers should think with responsibility about the selection of time and transmission channels of child targeted advertising. The purpose of the present paper is to investigate the influence of advertising upon consumer views and behaviour of children in different age groups. The present investigation has clarified the influence of advertising as a means of information on a certain group of society, which in the modern information society is the most vulnerable – children. In this paper we assess children's perception and their understanding of advertising.

**Keywords**—Advertising, children, children targeted advertising, consumer socialization process.

## I. INTRODUCTION

MASS media has an enormous influence on our culture i.e. on our society, including influence on such simple things as what to wear and what to worship. Since mass media makes a great effect on us, advertising uses it as an information transmitting channel and becomes an important and powerful means that forms consumers' attitudes, needs, and behaviour.

Modern information society is unimaginable without advertising. Advertising vigorously penetrates many facets of life. Under free market conditions when the range and supply of different goods and services is enormous, advertising becomes one of the main means of information, interest and persuasion for existing and potential clients. Advertising helps the consumer choose products, stimulates individual buyers and sometimes the whole groups of buyers to acquire certain products.

Talking about the significance of advertising and its influence on society, the following positive social and economic functions can be singled out:

- *Social functions*: advertising informs the buyers about scientific and technical achievements, educates and enlightens, develops esthetic taste, advocates healthy and civilized lifestyle, consolidates rational needs, etc.
- *Economic functions*: it helps to balance out the supply and demand of goods, improves and

encourages new needs of consumers, helps buyers to orientate themselves in the marketplace, encourages production development, speeds up the transition of goods, advocates innovative sales methods, etc.[1, 4]

However, it has to be acknowledged that the influence of advertising is not entirely positive. In spite of its many advantages it is impossible to argue or to conceal some of its negative influence. Advertising can be artistic and represent high moral values; sometimes it can be even inspiring. But it can also be vulgar and morally degrading. It often aims at such feelings as jealousy, social ambition or desire. Propaganda is very common in advertising, it appeals to our emotions rather than intellect. Such combination is spread in all societies. Propaganda uses various slogans: from politics to sex. Other advertisements have a "task" – a hidden message that often works on us subconsciously. Such messages are recorded appealing to our subconscious perception. This hidden appeal to our basic instincts (such as fear, death and love) is used to advertise a great variety of goods and services. The research has proved that hidden images are most frequently used in advertisements of alcoholic drinks, but obvious proof of that is often missing. The positive and negative influence of advertising effects the whole society; however, the negative influence can easily and frequently reach the most vulnerable part of the society – children and adolescents.

Children targeted advertising industry is an extremely difficult and problematic activity. The development of it is influenced by a number of factors: not only the decisions taken by the producers and clients of advertising, but also the regulations issued by the state, negative attitude of society and the consequences of advertising effect. The creators of advertising targeted at children should first of all pay more attention to the improvement of their marketing systems, take the most effective marketing decisions in order to obtain the best results and the highest level of satisfying customer's needs. Companies creating children targeted advertisements should necessarily consider the needs of the society and not to guide themselves by the needs of some individuals. The society itself should see that its interests are taken into account by advertising companies. It is not easy to do, because the interests of separate individuals (usually these are private companies) can often clearly contradict the interests of the society. However, many companies have already understood that it is damaging to ignore the interests, popular values and attitudes of the society. Therefore, a proper attitude towards advertising should be created. At the same time high quality and socially correct commercials should be made. One thing is clear – advertising will not disappear from our life. It will continue influencing our life as well as the life of our children.

It is very important how the state controls advertising and what the legal basis of it is in view of minimizing negative influence on children. In this paper we assess how advertising affects children in modern society. The aim of the research was to investigate how children understand and perceive advertising in different age groups.

## II. THE INFLUENCE OF ADVERTISING ON CHILDREN IN DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS

Age is an index and a very important component for children facing commercial information i.e. advertising. Previous research has clearly shown that children's understanding of TV commercials and their persuasiveness depend on their age.

Different scientists distinguish children age groups and their understanding of advertising in several ways. As suggested by Ward, Wackman and Wartel [16] children aged from 5 to 8 years already understand the difference between TV programs and commercials that are included in them (a commercial is short and a programme lasts longer). Older children – 9 to 12 years, perceive the different meaning of information (programmes show stories and commercials show products). Children aged from 5 to 6 years experience difficulty in distinguishing lie, fantasy and pretence. They confuse commercials and TV programmes. Therefore, they are less vulnerable than ten-year-olds. Children of 7 years of age are capable of seeing the difference between fantasy and reality. At the age of 9 they already recognize the products they need, or products that failed them. Some children of 10 years of age have already decided that "commercials always lie".[3]

About 75% of children in the age group from 9 to 12 years who participated in the research carried out by Ward, Wackman and Ward [16] demonstrated an average level of knowledge received from advertising. Finally, children from 11 to 12 years showed more understanding about what a lie in advertising was. That is the first step into the world of "hypocrisy of society". Pre-school children learn to recognize TV programmes and distinguish them from other TV programmes. Almost all children of 5 years of age are capable of distinguishing advertising from TV programmes. What they cannot do is to tell the difference between them. They mention only one feature - commercials are short. So, small children might know that they are watching something else, not a TV programme, but they do not understand that the aim of what they are watching is to encourage them to buy a product or a service.

Understanding of the intent of advertising usually appears when children reach the age of 7 to 8 years. Up till then children consider advertising as amusement ("commercials are funny") or as neutral information ("commercials tell about things that we can buy"). Reaching the age of 7 to 8 years children start to envisage the persuasive aim of advertising. They come to a conclusion that advertisers are people trying to make other people buy something. At the age of 8 children not only start understanding persuasive features of advertising but they also recognize lies in advertising. They do not believe any more that commercials are always true. Once children step

into adolescence, their belief in truthfulness of advertising becomes even more negative. Together with this there comes a clearer understanding why commercials lie sometimes, and how to distinguish fair commercials from unfair ones (i.e. producers want to sell a product to make money; thus, they have to make their product look better than it really is). Children at the age of 7 to 10 years often cannot identify unfair commercials; however, they understand that advertised products should be tried first. Family, friends and television also contribute to the development of skeptical view on advertising. The critical view of small children is formed with the influence from their parents, whereas the skepticism of adolescents is due to their independent thinking and access to alternative sources of information (recommendations of friends, etc.). So, children up to 8 years of age are the most vulnerable. They are most easily misled by advertising.

On the other hand, understanding the intent of advertising and the fact that commercials are not always true, does not help to reduce a child's desire to get a certain toy or a snack/sweet. Even the grownups sometimes want to buy an advertised product, thinking at the same time that it is too good to be true. Thus, a child's understanding of the intent of advertising should not be taken as immunity against all commercials. Certain commercials can be very persuasive to children as well as to adults. [9]

Clay [14] states that the main factor determining a child's understanding of advertising is his or her age. The results of the research let him distinguish several age groups and their understanding of advertising:

1. *Very young* children (up to 4 years of age) do not distinguish between commercials and TV programmes. Due to their distinctness, melodies and short duration commercials for such children are the most interesting programmes.
2. *Older children (between 5 and 8 years of age)* are already able to distinguish between commercials and other TV programmes. However, they recognize commercials from external, formal features (e.g. commercials are short, programmes last long). They do not really perceive the intent of persuasion and selling which are hidden behind the imagery of commercials. Therefore, they cannot look at commercials critically and resist their influence consciously.
3. *Children aged between 9 and 12 years* can almost discriminate between the contents of commercials and TV programmes (programmes are stories, commercials are about products). They comprehend that advertising indicates what products to buy. They can look upon advertising more critically and objectively, and can resist its influence. The ability to take advertising critically becomes more important than the total amount of viewed commercials. Adolescents develop negative attitudes towards advertising and pay less attention to most commercials.

Deborah Roedder John [7] investigated the influence of children's age on understanding advertising and reacting to it,

as well as on their consumer knowledge, consumer understanding and values in every age group. The first study she mentions is the theory by Jean Piaget (1957) about cognitive development of children (see Table I).

TABLE I  
STAGES OF CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT BY JEAN PIAGET (1957) [7]

| Stage                    | Age                      |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| I Sensomotoric           | from birth up to 2 years |
| II Preoperational        | 2 to 7 years             |
| III Concrete operational | 7 to 11 years            |
| IV Formal operational    | 11 years to adult person |

These stages differ by cognitive capability and its sources, accessible for children. At preoperational stage children are perceptually connected with aspects of their environment that are easy to memorize. Children at concrete operational stage do not take perception as reality, they think deeper about the stimulus in their environment. At preoperational stage children can be characterized by centration, i.e. a tendency to concentrate attention to one dimension. Children at concrete operational stage are able to think about several dimensions at the same time and connect them in a deeper and more abstract manner. Finally, at formal operational stage children make progress towards the adult way of thinking; they are characterized by even more complex thinking about particular and hypothetical objects and situations.

Speaking about child's ability to distinguish between advertising and TV programmes in view of these stages, it is possible to state that smaller children (pre-school) distinguish advertising from TV programmes perceptually (e.g. commercials are shorter) but not by their intent (e.g. the aim of advertising is to sell products). Once children reach the age of 8 years (concrete operational stage) they acquire more understanding about persuasive intent and tendencies of advertising. However, this understanding is not necessarily used to evaluate every commercial. Though children at the age of 8 to 11 years know about advertising quite a lot, their ability to remember and use this knowledge is still developing.

### III. SOCIALIZATION OF CHILD AS A CONSUMER

Apart from the views of the authors mentioned above on the importance of children's age in understanding advertising, we must investigate other theories on information processing and child's development. All of them concentrate on child's developing capability to recognize information, decipher, concentrate and reproduce it.

Social development of children is as important as their cognitive capabilities. It involves such topics as development of morality, altruism, formation of impression and social perspective. Social perspective includes the ability to see not only from your own standpoint. It is strongly connected with the influence to buy and ability to negotiate. Formation of impression involves the ability to make social comparisons. It is strongly connected with the understanding of the social aspect of goods and consumption. [12]

Selman [15] presents a description of how children's capability to understand different perspectives changes as they

move from one stage to another. Pre-school children (from 3 to 6 years of age) are in their *undifferentiated stage* (see Table II). They do not understand any other perspective except that of their own. Once they reach the next stage – *social-informational* (from 6 to 8 years of age) children learn that other people might have a different opinion or motives but still believe that it is so due to different information about a certain situation, not because of a different standpoint. At this stage children are not able yet to think from another person's perspective. This ability appears at the *self-reflecting stage* (from 8 to 10 years of age), when children understand that other people might have a different opinion or motives even with the same information about a certain situation, they can also think from another person's standpoint. However, the ability to think from another person's standpoint and at the same time from that of your own appears only at the next stage – *third-party perspective-taking* (from 10 to 12 years of age). That is a very important moment, because social interaction, such as persuasion and negotiating, demands double reasoning from the perspectives of both sides. The last stage – *societal perspective-taking* (from 12 to 15 years and older) involves additional development, ability to understand another person's standpoint when he/she belongs to a different social group or system.

TABLE II  
STAGES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PERSPECTIVE-TAKING BY R. L. SELMAN [15]

| Stage                               | Age                      |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| I Egocentric (undifferentiated)     | 3 to 6 years             |
| II Social-informational role taking | 6 to 8 years             |
| III Self-reflecting role taking     | 8 to 10 years            |
| IV Third-party perspective taking   | 10 to 12 years           |
| V Societal role taking              | 12 to 15 years and older |

Following these theories it is possible to explain why pre-school children do not understand the persuasive intent of advertising. The ability to recognize it requires looking at advertising from advertiser's standpoint. It does not happen until children reach the age of 8 to 10 years, as L.Selman illustrates it in child's development stages. Ability to understand advertiser's motives requires even more detailed thinking due to special advertising techniques used, such as celebrity appearance, humour. Here one needs to think not only about a double standpoint (advertiser and audience) but also to comprehend what means are appropriate and effective in certain types of situations. The description of abilities at the last stage of development makes it clear, that understanding of the tactics of advertising appears in early adolescence and develops further.

In the opinion of Deborah Roedder John [7] consumer socialization is a development process lasting through several stages, until children become adult consumers. Based on cognitive and social development stages it is possible to see changes appearing when children are more and more involved in consumer's role. There are three stages of consumer socialization: perceptual, analytical and reflective (see Table III).

TABLE III  
CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION STAGES BY DEBORAH ROEDDER JOHN [7]

| Characteristics                                  | Perceptual stage<br>3-7 years                         | Analytical stage<br>7-11 years                              | Reflective stage<br>11-16 years                          |
|--|---|---|--|
| <i>Knowledge structures:</i>                     |   |   |  |
| <i>Orientation</i>                               | Concrete  | Abstract  | Abstract   |
| <i>Focus</i>                                     | Perceptual features                                   | Functional/underlying features                              | Functional/underlying features                           |
| <i>Complexity</i>                                | One-dimensional                                       | Two or more dimensions                                      | Multidimensional<br>Contingent("if-then")                |
| <i>Perspective</i>                               | Egocentric<br>(own perspectives)                      | Dual perspectives<br>(own + others)                         | Dual perspectives in social<br>context                   |
| <i>Decision-making and influence strategies:</i> |   |   |  |
| <i>Orientation</i>                               | Expedient   | Thoughtful  | Strategic  |
| <i>Focus</i>                                     | Perceptual features<br>Salient features               | Functional/underlying features<br>Relevant features         | Functional/underlying features<br>Relevant features      |
| <i>Complexity</i>                                | Single attributes<br>Limited repertoire of strategies | Two or more attributes<br>Expanded repertoire of strategies | Multiple attributes<br>Complete repertoire of strategies |
| <i>Adaptive</i>                                  | Emerging  | Moderate  | Fully developed  |
| <i>Perspective</i>                               | Egocentric  | Dual perspectives   | Dual perspectives in social<br>context                   |

These stages are described by a number of characteristics illustrating changes in the development of knowledge, ability to make decisions in stages of influenced buying. Perceptive stage was called so due to characteristic features of children at that age: they think perceptively as opposed to abstract or symbolic thinking. Analytical stage is named after the ability to see things in more detail and analytically; reflective stage – because children acquire understanding about complex social content and values connected with consumption.

*Perceptual stage* (from 3 to 7 years of age) is characterized by general orientation towards quick and easily noticeable perceptive market features. Children's consumer knowledge is defined by perceptive qualities and features. It is often based on one dimension and personal observations. Such children recognize trademarks and shops, but their understanding of them is superficial. Due to restrictions in coding and collecting information individual objects or experiences are seldom included into more generalized structures of knowledge with multiple dimensions, perspectives and conditions ("if-then" rules).

The majority of these features apply to consumer's ability to take decisions and influence strategies at perceptive stage. Orientation can be described as simple, targeted and egocentric. Decisions are often based on very limited information. Limited adaptation is a characteristic feature of strategies influencing children. Children see such situations from egocentric perspective. They are unable to perceive another person's perspective when they determine strategies they would use in persuading and negotiating for desired products. Children of that age might know that the views of their parents and friends are different, but it is difficult for them to think from their own and from somebody else's perspective at the same time.

Once they reach *analytical stage* (from 7 to 11 years of age) a lot of changes are noticeable in cognitive as well as in social facets. The move from perceptive to symbolic thinking

together with the increased capacity to process information allows better understanding of the market and its features, such as advertising and trademarks. They already think about categories of goods and prices; their analysis of products and trademarks is based on more than one dimension or feature; generalizations are based on personal experience. Thinking progresses on a more abstract level. Children consider their choices better; they take into account more than one feature of a product. Thus children become more flexible in their attitude which is decisive in taking buying decisions; they are more responsible and adaptable. These tendencies are noticeable when children try to make influence and negotiate for desired things. They start thinking from the perspective of their parents and friends and adjust their persuasive strategies accordingly.

*Reflective stage* (from 11 to 16 years of age) is characterized by further cognitive and social development. The knowledge about trademarks and prices in the market is even more reflected. A great change in orientation is noticed when children reach adolescence. They concentrate more attention to the social meaning of consumer market. They have a better understanding about other people's perspectives and a bigger demand to express their own identity, as well as a need to comply with the expectations of the group. These factors direct their attention towards social aspects of being a consumer and taking decisions. The decisions they make are more adapted, they depend on situations and tasks. The efforts to influence parents and friends reflect social understanding. Adolescents do it using strategies that in their opinion would be accepted better than a simple, direct method.

The conclusion might be drawn that when children mature and become more informed about the intents of advertising, there might appear a negative attitude towards advertising. When children grow up their negative attitude towards advertising develops; at the same time they pay less attention to a lot of products. If children paid attention to an attractive

commercial it might have an important direct effect on them. During the research performed by Gorn, and Goldberg [10] boys of 8 to 10 years of age were shown commercials of an attractive toy once. Later those children expressed interest and positive reaction to that toy as well as growing motivation to acquire it. However, further demonstrations of the same product did not increase the initial effect.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Following the performed analysis we hold the opinion that the intents of advertising to persuade and to sell are not always so apparent. The smaller the child is the more vulnerable he or she is to advertising. This fact is often exploited by advertisers. They know that children love TV programmes that include drawings, animated cartoons and other rapidly changing bright objects so they use these techniques in commercials. The number of commercials based on the emotional address is increasing as compared to that of informative commercials; this might mean that more attentive children who react stronger to such addresses can be even more exposed to advertising information. A negative attitude towards advertising usually strengthens as children grow and their understanding of the advertising intent develops. With age children acquire "advertising" experience: they have already tried products they wanted but were disappointed with them. Based on this experience they might even suspect of a certain deception, though they cannot always clearly express it.

Children at the age of 10 are already able to decide that commercials sometimes lie. Their negative attitude is stimulated by a growing gap between looking at certain goods and possibilities to acquire them. Unfortunately we have to note that advertising may be harmful since it develops cynicism. Children at the age of 11 to 12 years of age develop a more restrained attitude to advertising. Such children almost fully comprehend the aims of advertising and are more inclined to tolerate its lies. Children as consumers must learn how to take decisions, collect appropriate information, evaluate and compare goods, and apply different decision strategies. Advertising inevitably becomes part of this process. Therefore, it is very important to teach children to become critical users of advertising. They have to learn to understand the aims and means of commercials as early as their level of development allows it.

Prohibition of advertising is not a good solution since commercials have already become part of children's lives. Children are influenced by a number of sources of information: the Internet, television, magazines, school, friends, etc. Therefore, it is important to discuss advertising as much as possible and to teach children to be critical users of advertising. Ethic and socially positive advertising is necessary when commercials are targeted at a very important part of the society – children. Only such orientation promises a general trend of society perfection, growth and maturity. Finally, as a generalization author would like to quote a famous advertising executive David Mackenzie Ogilvy: "*Never write an advertisement which you wouldn't want your*

*own family to read. You wouldn't tell lies to your own wife. Don't tell them to mine. Do as you would be done by. If you tell lies about a product, you will be found out -- either by the Government, which will prosecute you, or by the consumer, who will punish you by not buying your product a second time. Good products can be sold by honest advertising. If you don't think the product is good, you have no business to be advertising it."* [6]

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