

THE VULNERABILITY OF CHILDREN WHO ARE CONSUMERS OF ADVERTISEMENTS

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Abstract: My paper presents a less explored section of what actually represents the impact of advertising on children, namely the vulnerability of the consumer child. The child is recognized as belonging to vulnerable categories of children, the concept of child vulnerability as a consumer is controversial, as advertisers say that they are a good means of informing and developing children directly and indirectly to inform adults, while critics of advertising accentuate their vulnerability due to lack of discernment of children. Another controversial issue is the age at which children acquire discernment, being able to become aware of the advertising message received and less vulnerable to this message. The article includes a study of what actually implies the vulnerability of children who are consumers of audiovisual advertising, as well as an analysis of the techniques used in the commercials displayed on two of the most viewed Romanian TV channels for children.

Keywords: children, audiovisual advertising, vulnerability, consumer

When talking about children, we are talking about anyone who has not reached the age of 18, according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted in 1989, at which Romania joined in 1990. (Balahur, 2001) The concept of Vulnerability of people is a complex notion. The notion of vulnerability refers to a wound, a blow that a person might suffer. (Oxford Dictionary) Robert Gooden associates the notion of vulnerability with a danger, which comes from negligence, lack or as a side effect of some actions. (Gooden, 1985) Therefore, vulnerability can be both physical and psychological, following a certain action but also by lacking it. Another very important aspect of establishing the vulnerability, according to Gooden, is that "a person can be considered vulnerable when the welfare or interests of the person concerned are jeopardized by an act or its lack" (Gooden, 1985: 111) Children are considered to be vulnerable precisely by the "lack of physical and intellectual maturity, requiring special protection and care, including adequate legal protection." (Convention on the Rights of the Child, Preamble) While the child is one of the categories of vulnerable people, the concept of child vulnerability as a consumer is controversial, because advertisers say they are a good means of Information and development of children directly, and a good information of adults around children, while advertising critics accentuate their vulnerability due to lack of discernment (Moore, 2004).

In the case of the consumer, several levels of vulnerability have been found, which I have presented in the table below:

Physical vulnerability	It is the category of persons with increased sensitivity due to physical or biological sensitivities for the products promoted on the market. And there are persons suffering from allergies or a certain sensitivity to some associations of chemicals that make up the product. (Brenkert, 1998)
Cognitive vulnerability	This category includes people who do not have the cognitive ability to analyze the information that they receive. This category includes children under 8 who have not yet developed this capacity (Derscheid <i>et al.</i> , 1996; Dubow, 1995; Fischer <i>et al.</i> , 1991; Goldberg, 1990) and elder people who have not learned about marketing techniques and their addressing style. (Brenkert, 1998)
Affective vulnerability	Vulnerability at this level is the inability to resist temptations from advertisements. Small children are prone to this type of vulnerability because they still cannot select the information and therefore they do not have the ability to create counter-arguments. Thus, they will easily believe that a game will help them integrate into a group or bring them a certain popularity. (Derbaix & Bree, 1997; Moore & Lutz, 2000; Oprea <i>et al.</i> , 2014)
Behavioral vulnerability	In this case, reference is made to the consumption behavior, which in the case of children is determined by the demand for children's products on the market, which was found to be directly influenced by advertisements. (Buijzen, Valkenburg, 2003, 2005).

Fiona Spotswood and Agnes Nairn (2016) highlight an important issue for my research relating the vulnerability of the consumer, and especially of the consumer child. They show that vulnerability comes precisely from the fact that the consumer is confronted with the power of corporate marketing structures and, in particular, with the informational power imbalance that may result in compelling commercial messages. Friestad and Wright (1994) assert that one of the first responsibilities of the consumer is to understand the message from a cognitive point of view, and then to manage the advertising presentations.

Such skills the consumer can develop over time by expanding it's personal knowledge of the tactics used in these attempts to convince. This knowledge that helps them first identify how marketing techniques attempt to influence the consumer, their approach, and when they need to be careful about such techniques. A fairly sensitive case is the case of the consumer child, because understanding the intent to sell is around the age of eight. Until this age, the child understands the advertising message as any other discursive text. At the age of 12, the children understand the intention to sell and with it the persuasive message. However, they are still not able to manage the influence of the persuasive message. (Oates *et al.*, 2010; Buijzen, Mens, 2007; Rozendaal *et al.*, 2009; Buijzen, Valkenburg, 2000)

Methods of persuasion in children advertisements

In order to attract attention, to recognize products and, ultimately, to acquire them, advertising use a series of strategies, depending on the objective of the ad. "Persuasion is defined as more than a conviction, representing a distortion, a distortion or a change of values, wishes, beliefs of the other's actions." (O'Shaughnessy, O'Shaughnessy, 2004: 5)

While the impact of adult advertising may be problematic, for children it can be devastating, especially given that an average child is exposed to more than 40,000 TV advertisements in a year. Moreover, today, children television programs is no longer offering them entertainment only, but "teaches" them how to become consumers before they reach the age of 14 (Oates *et al.*, 2002, *Impact of Advertising ...*, 2007). Children are most sensitive due to their age and inability to understand the message of advertising, being more easily convinced compared to adults (Bansal, 2010). Thus more than one third of children believe in broadcast advertisements, regardless of their background (Oates *et al.*, 2002; *Impactul publicității...*, 2007; Nash *et al.*, 2009; Dovey *et al.*, 2011; Olsen, 2010; Kunkel, Roberts, 1991) Although studies show that, at the age of eight, children are able to understand the intention to advertise, the children's attitudes towards consumption are unknown, especially as the products presented are highlighted by childhood experiences (games, spending time with parents, meeting with or acquiring friends and others - Moore, 2000, 32).

In this way we can see that the purchase of the product is related to the feelings experienced in the favorite or unhappy moments of the children. So the product gets to be purchased for the feelings it can generate and not necessarily for its utility. Analyzing some specific examples, it can be noticed that the induced feeling does not correspond to the usefulness of the promoted product. So, for Johnson's shiny hair shampoo, small consumers are urged to want this shampoo because it gives them the glow of the princesses and not because it cleanses or has a certain natural ingredient. In the same way, it is the impression that a child can be the best and most powerful when consuming Tedi, not because he is thirsty or hungry.

So, this aspect gives us a challenge to meditation in respect of the information through advertising. Schor (2003) argues that marketers emphasize treating children as a functional equivalent of adults. In the liberal discourse of consumer policies, it is stated that advertising is in the interest of consumers, although the same marketers actually "build" the children as tradable, analyzed and classified objects, and then this information is provided to the clients. This information increases the power of these client companies, affecting every day in the lives of children, making their products and experiences more and more irresistible. (Schor, 2003)

Persuasion techniques

Studies highlight the existence of several types of persuasion strategies in advertising. (Jenkin *et al.*, 2004; Boyland *et al.*, 2012; Rozendaal *et al.*, 2011; Hebden *et al.*, 2011; Pryor *et al.*, 1997; Boush *et al.*, 1994; Buijzen, Valkenburg, 2011; Calvert, 2008; Kunkel, 2004; Kunkel, Roberts, 1991) Companies that produce children products today are numerous and, in order to enter the market, need to be known. Since children have become a consumer, many businesses have begun to address children directly, using some techniques to make the products noticed and wanted.

In the table below, I analyzed the main persuasion techniques used in children's ads:

The persuasion technique	The function of persuasion technique
Repetition	A certain message is constantly repeated within the advertisement. This creates the idea of a certain familiarity with the promoted product;
Associating components of a particular brand	This technique is related to the licensed products or to the link between a cartoon and a toy company that makes the cartoon characters. One of the most well-known companies that uses this technique is McDonald's, recently offering the famous Trolls with the children's menu.
Capturing attention by highlighting certain features	It refers in particular to certain audio / video features, such as action, the sound effects that train and attract attention;
Animations	Typically, drawings are used in this technique, as in Johnson's Shampoo, for example, but sometimes the ad itself is a cartoon-like animation that captures immediate attention and confuses, as is the case for advertisements that promote the Tedi juice or the Paula pudding.
Using celebrities	In advertisements, the image of a star is often used, which gives a certain sense of product: trust, quality, value. For example, the products promoted with the main character of Soy Luna;
Surprise products with the sold products	It usually involves a toy, a technique used for example by McDonald's and by the big supermarkets.
Product placement	Placing the product next to a drawing, movie, or address where products can be viewed, placed in a visible way on the screen.
Integrated marketing	It involves joining two techniques, such as offering a Disney (licensed) toy along with another product that also has an association with the promoted brand. For example, Gazeta Sporturilor, which comes with a children's book or McDonald's toy menu.
Advertisement as a news video about the novelty of a product	Found in campaigns organized for a product.

Research methodology

In this study I conducted the content analysis of the ads running on two of the children programs, namely Disney Channel and Cartoon Network. I chose the two programs based on the rating realized over the past three years by Kantar Media Audiences for the Romanian Audience Measurement Association. There are currently six programs for children who meet the criteria established by the Romanian Audience Measurement Association. The evolution of the chosen

programs can be seen in the table attached to Appendix 1. The target audience considered in the measurements is aged over 4, both in urban and rural areas.

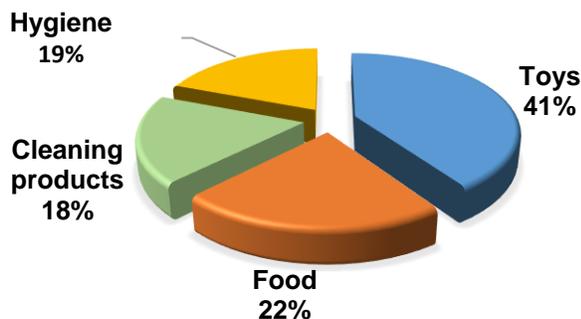
According to the data provided by Kantar Media, audiences recorded by children's programs in 2014, 2015, and 2016 have remained fairly high, surpassing TV programs such as Acasă, B1TV, Pro Cinema, DigiSport 1, AXN, Realitatea, Digi 24, TVR 2, History Channel, National Geographic or Discovery. The ads analyzed below were selected based on the number of occurrences per day. I chose the content analysis because it allows me to analyze a large number of advertisements, from which I can see the promoted products and the techniques used, the length of the advertisements, as well as the various elements specific to the advertisements.

In this study we analyzed 673 advertisements (413 - Disney, 260 - Cartoon Network). The ads were monitored on a Saturday, from 8:00 am to 8:00 pm. A first grading of advertisements was by dividing them according to the promoted product: advertisements for food, toys, hygiene / care and cleaning products. Then, within each category, we analyzed the persuasion techniques used, the information provided, and the ways to capture attention. In the analysis we included the advertisements that were played more than 8 times.

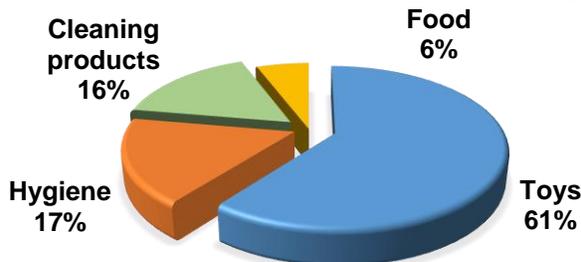
Analysis of the advertisements for children

The content analysis was made after analyzing 263 unique advertisements running on children's channels. The purpose of the analysis included in the study was the knowledge of marketing techniques used in commercials for children. The study of the advertisements has helped me make the focus group research. It has helped me to understand the vulnerability of children to the commercials.

On Disney Channel, I analyzed 413 ads, representing:



On Cartoon Network, I analyzed 260 ads, representing:



In the last analysis, toys are ranked first, followed by hygiene products. To identify marketing techniques, I tracked and analyzed ads that have more than eight occurrences per day. I chose to analyze the ones with the most occurrences precisely because repetition is a factor in their retention. I analyzed the advertisements from the perspective of nine marketing techniques. The techniques listed above are the most common in children's ads. (Jenkin *et al.*, 2014) Then I chose to underline the message sent by the advertisement, either by its own slogan or by highlighted words (by their direct writing or emphasized by the voice of the person promoting the product).

The ads played were in a very small number in the morning, meaning two or three commercials until 10 o'clock, followed by an increase of up to twenty consecutive advertisements after that hour. Food ads are identified especially by special effects created by actions, images and sounds. Because children are unable to retain very much product-related information if they have a more detailed presentation, (Gunter, Oates, & Blades, 2005) the special effects related to taste are the most common in food advertisements, which makes small viewers to be easily attracted by them and to memorize the products promoted by commercials using these techniques. (Palmer, Young, 2003; Young, 2008) In the analyzed food advertisements, the taste was one of the most common evocations. Food ads, unlike toys, do not use multiple techniques, but they use these "baits" through sound and image, which make children want their products.

Another aspect that is generally seen in advertisements promoted on children's channels is the presence of children in the ad, children who become models for those in front of the small screens, reinforcing advertisements. (Calvert, 2008) It is also possible to observe the use of sounds and images rather than the use of words and the messages sent are that the promoted foods are delicious, healthy, unique, and that they are carefully prepared to fulfill even the most capricious desires.

However, there are studies that vehemently challenge the transmission of this information, because of the vulnerability of children and the fact that promoted food is not recommended for their healthy development. (Jenkin *et al.*, 2004; Roberts *et al.*, 2014; Harris, 2012; Dovey *et al.*, 2011; Hebden *et al.*, 2011; Thornley *et al.*, 2010; McGinnis *et al.*)

Regarding the ads for toys, I found that they contain at least two techniques used in addition to images, action and sound. I consider that the ads for toys are the most "aggressive" because they use different phrases which induce the feeling that friendship, uniqueness, success in the group of children is directly linked to the presence of promoted toys. For example, there are messages such as, "Give your hair the charm you've always dreamed of." (advertisement for hair coloring product), "Transform the party into your own glamorous show" (advertisement for manicure / pedicure product), "Your best friend is Mimi, of course!" (advertisement for a toy puppy), "You're more beautiful ... you're already a princess with a charming mirror ..." (advertisement for an interactive mirror). These are just a few examples from advertisements made for girls' toys, but the examples are as numerous in the case of boys.

Advertisements clearly show the destination of the products. In the case of the products for girls, there are used predominantly colors such as pink and purple, as opposed to boys, where the predominant colors are black, dark blue, and dark green, aspects that segment the product market very well. Also, in children's ads, gender differentiation is also done with regard to the place where the presentation takes place, so in the case of the products promoted to girls, the action takes place indoors, while in the case of boys, the action takes place in open spaces.

After categorizing into product categories, I have made a classification for adult ads and ads for children. We've noticed that most of the Hygiene and Cleaning Products are for adults, and here we find advertisements for women's deodorants, women's and men's shampoos, women's clothes, detergents, women's toiletries, toilet paper.

In these advertisements adults are present most often and very rarely children. Advertisements also contain fewer marketing techniques than advertisements for toys, for example. They are in the form of stories with details. Women are directly linked to cleaning products, some of which encompass certain states of envy ("she will boast again with her expensive toys"), of elegance and beauty ("turn the attraction into a lasting relationship"), while men are always masterful, successful ("shoulders are made for greatness, not for dandruff").

Although the advertisements are addressed to adults, children are receptive to them and memorize the brand, the slogan and also manage to easily identify these advertisements. The latter observations are related to the continuation of this study in a series of focus groups and one of the reasons for promoting these products is the formation of children as future consumers. (Calvert, 2008) And when a brand reaches a certain level of awareness, the more positive the attitude toward product placement is, the stronger is its effect on the memory capacity, attitude and intention to buy. (Buijzen, Valkenburg, 2003)

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Appendix

	2014		2015		2016		Evolution in 2016	
	Rating		Rating		Rating		Rating	
	National	Urban	National	Urban	National	Urban	National	Urban
Disney	99468	45840	83750	40000	92000	40600	+8250	+600
Cartoon Network	57609	23271	61667	28500	72600	29400	+10933	+900
Disney Junior	50493	33095	50333	31667	54800	31200	+4467	-467
Boomerang	40805	21297	44250	23250	49600	24600	+5350	+1350
Minimax/A+	38688	11499	35667	9250	44000	16400	+8333	+7150
Nickelodeon	36125	22950	32583	19833	21800	13000	-10783	-6833
TOTAL	323188	157952	308250	152500	334800	155200	26550	2700

1. Children's channels ratings: viewers per minute.