EXPLORING HOW PARENTS INFLUENCE THE VALUES PROMOTED IN ADVERTISEMENTS FOR GAMES AND TOYS

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Abstract: *Parents have the authority to determine which games and toys are suitable for their children, and this decision is influenced by various factors. Initially, parents take into account the marketing aspects of the games or toys. Simultaneously, they also consider their children's preferences. A study involving 336 parents in Romania utilized a questionnaire to delve into their viewpoints regarding the choice of games and toys, as well as the role that advertising plays in shaping their decisions. Preliminary findings from this research indicate that materialistic tendencies might stem from within the family. Additionally, advertisements are perceived as overly aggressive, which is a widespread concern, given that children frequently express a longing for toys showcased on television. The values that parents aim to promote among their children encompass empathy, kindness, responsibility, loyalty, curiosity, wisdom, education, family, and friendship. The study raises questions about the dynamics between parents and children concerning the selection of toys and games, as well as the impact of advertising on these choices.*
Keywords: advertising, materialism, parental impact, values

Introduction

Parents have a significant influence on the games and toys that they choose and buy for their kids. Because there isn't a lot of research on children and parent behaviour in Romania, this study aimed to understand how parents choose games and toys for their kids, what values they wish to encourage in them, and whether or not there are indicators of materialism in the family's conduct. Children use their power to influence their parents, which is known as pester power (Lawlor & Prothero, 2011), (Sutherland & Thompson, 2003), (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2008), however, parents also have a say in how their children are socialized as consumers (Ahn, 2021). Children's behaviour is shaped by their parents, who inform them about the purpose of ads. Advertisements express values that kids learn, and toys reflect these values as well (Ahn, 2021), (Mendoza, 2009). Based on issues like the purpose of toys and games, consumer socialization behaviour, media literacy, and the Romanian family value system, the study investigates the dynamics of parent-child interactions.

Literature review

Few studies have looked into how children in Romania became market-active consumers, and similar to Bulgaria (Opree et al., 2019), little is known about how youngsters in Eastern European nations are affected by advertising. The study done by Opree (2019), set out to look into how children between the ages of 8 and 11 in three Sofia

schools were exposed to advertising. The results showed that exposure to advertising enhance children's materialism and involvement in consumption. Additionally, it discovered that children's conceptual advertising literacy exacerbated the impacts of materialism in children exposed to high levels of advertising but mitigated the effects in children exposed to moderate levels. The current examination begins by examining topics pertaining to consumer socialization, the impact of advertising on materialism, and the values that are promoted by toy and game advertising.

Consumer socialisation - the role of parents

Consumer socialization involves the extent of time children spend in front of the television. The more time they dedicate to watching, the stronger their desires become, and they become more susceptible to trusting the assertions made in commercials (Dotson & Hyatt, 2005). When parents decline to provide children with advertised products, it often leads to heightened pestering and family conflicts (Calvert, 2008) (Marshall et al., 2007). Despite the prevailing notion that a child's comprehension of persuasive marketing evolves gradually to resemble an adult's understanding, there has been limited research examining this level of adult-like advertising comprehension (Wright et al., 2005). Consumer preferences refer to how values, attitudes, and behaviours influence the reception of a product or brand; consumer attitudes pertain to individuals' responses to advertising and various promotional tactics. Consumer skills entail a child's grasp of the purchasing process, ability to compare products, criteria assessment, and cost determination (Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016). These proficiencies are imparted to children through instruction, modelling, and meditation. Brands adopt family-friendly approaches to attract children, recognizing that children collect behaviours, attitudes, and perspectives on consumption and the market through interactions with their parents (Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016) (Barrie, 2015, p.78).

Families significantly shape a child's consumption habits, yet television and its content wield considerable influence too. Television exposure imparts messages about consumerism, values, and significant behaviours to children. Frequent exposure may lead children to perceive the projected image as reality (Solomon et al., 2013). When parents limit their children's TV content, children's demands on them decrease, but if parents engage in TV watching with their children, children's expectations from their parents expand (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2008),(Solomon et al., 2013). Children employ various forms of nagging, from simple to complex involving bargaining or persuasion, to influence their parents (Sutherland & Thompson, 2003) (Acuff, 1997). Parents respond to their children's nagging using three distinct parenting strategies: expert authority based on knowledge, legitimate power strategies, or directive parenting approaches. These tactics also characterize the type of household environment, ranging from authoritarian settings emphasizing submission, neglectful households with diminished parental control, democratic households allowing children influence, to permissive households with minimal restrictions (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2008) (Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016) (Solomon et al., 2013). Toddler behaviours, especially among young toddlers, are actively influenced by their parents' perceptions of commercials, but when kids view TV advertisements, parental apathy often outweighs attentiveness (Calvert, 2008).

This realm has seen investigations into the dynamics of families. Parenting, based on interviews with parents, is acknowledged as stressful, stemming from the challenges of

effective time management, balancing family and work demands, children's performance expectations, financial pressures, and consumerism. Although parents generally express satisfaction with their relationships with their children, parenting remains a source of stress (Sidebotham, 2001).

The acquisition of games and toys

Considering children's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth, play holds immense significance in their development. Play facilitates the establishment of stronger bonds and relationships between parents, caregivers, educators, and children. While games and toys were initially regarded as mere sources of entertainment for children, over time, the realization dawned upon people regarding their pivotal role in the cognitive advancement of children (Calvert & Wilson, 2008). This realization emerged from the understanding that play and imagination serve as essential tools for children to internalize both behaviours and values (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Consequently, play has become a topic of discussion that strikes a balance between a child's requirement for leisure and the necessity to shield them from games and activities that may contain negative influences. From another perspective, concerns arise about games featuring unattainable goals or materialistic ideals that children might inadvertently absorb through play (Best, 1998). According to recent research by Richards et al. (2020), several factors influence parents' decisions when selecting toys for their children. Some parents of children aged 2 to 10 opt for toys that promote unstructured play due to their belief in its benefits, while simultaneously considering their children's preferences for toys. Parents frequently utilize the internet for information gathering, relying on online reviews, parenting blogs, websites, and virtual communities to gain insights and make informed choices. These selections of games and activities are pivotal as they set a precedent for the type of play parents offer to their children (Richards et al., 2020). The cultural perspective on the value of games and play varies across different high cultures and socioeconomic groups. While play holds a central role in the cognitive and social development of children in Western societies, its significance may be less apparent in less developed, traditional societies (Roopnarine, 2010). Additionally, children's perception of acceptable behaviours can differ based on their gender or the cultural norms prevalent in their environment (Pfeiffer & Butz, 2005).

Values that are promoted through games and toys advertisements

The widely accepted definition of a value, as proposed by Milton Rokeach, defines it as a strong belief that one particular course of action or final state of being is more beneficial for oneself or society compared to another option (Rokeach, 1968, p.5). Our lives are consistently guided by our values, impacting our daily interactions within relationships, groups, institutions, and societies (Agle & Caldwell, 1999). Values are structured within well-established hierarchical systems and serve as the foundation for shaping individuals' beliefs and behaviours (Rokeach, 1968) as cited in (Hosany et al., 2022). Through interaction with toys, children also learn about symbols prevalent in the adult world, including social roles, personal connections, and consumer expectations, all of which are represented through toys (Kline, 2018, 15-32), (Reich et al., 2017). Beyond their role in games, advertising serves to communicate ideals, desires, and values (Avraham & First, 2003). Advertising functions as a social and cultural influence, shaping people's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. It mirrors the aspirations of consumers within a

particular culture (Pollay & Gallagher, 1990), (Vandanaa & Lenkab, 2014). Within this context, it becomes crucial for promotional messages to prioritize responsible promotion of games that contribute to children's development (Gardner & et.al., 2012). Modern advertising is built upon subtle emotional associations rather than rational or factual communication, allowing advertisers to engage children indirectly, bypassing explicit persuasion knowledge (Nairn & Fine, 2008). Individuals shape their identities based on ideals propagated by consumer culture through advertising, believing that this aligns with happiness and emotional expression (Dittmar, 2007).

Danish researchers examined children's Christmas wishes and correlated them with TV commercials from various brands. The research revealed that 51.6% of the surveyed children desired at least one product advertised during that period. Factors such as age, gender, and exposure to the most advertised channel significantly influenced product preferences (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2000). Opree et al. (2014) investigated the relationship between materialism and exposure to advertising. Their long-term study of 8–11-year-old children indicated that materialism and exposure to advertising were linked, with product demand serving as a mediator and advertising exposure acting as a causal factor in fostering materialistic ideals. Unfavourable impacts of advertising include consumerism, parent-child conflict, and dissatisfaction (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003). Parental mediation of advertising can attenuate the connection between advertising exposure and materialism, especially through consistent conversations and discussions between parents and children about advertising, as revealed by a study involving 360 parent-child dyads (children aged 8 to 12) (Buijzen et al., 2008). Contrary to popular belief, an increase in life happiness among 8 to 11-year-olds leads to a decrease in materialism. However, this effect is observed only in children who are frequently exposed to television advertising. It is plausible that material values portrayed in advertising convince children that possessing material possessions helps them cope with a lower quality of life. Reducing this influence is critical, as research indicates that materialistic children may grow up to be less content as adults (Opree et al., 2012).

A study involving children and teenagers aged 8 to 18 explored how materialism changes with age. The findings indicated an increase in materialism from middle childhood to early adolescence, followed by a decline from early to late adolescence. Additionally, a causal link between materialism and self-esteem was investigated, revealing that bolstering self-worth correlates with reduced materialistic tendencies. Fostering a positive sense of self significantly reduces adolescent materialism and eliminates age-related disparities (Chaplin & John, 2007). Values serve as a fundamental component of culture, but they alone cannot fully explain intergroup differences. Social institutions are primarily influenced by culture, while individuals are predominantly shaped by family and education. Children acquire values through family socialization, and parents influence their children's values through parenting styles and social environments (Döring et al., 2016).

Research methodology

Even though children themselves might not actively make purchases, their parents do, and marketing significantly influences a child's attitude towards products and brands (Pine & Nash, 2002). The individual who actually spends money to buy items, the customer, plays a pivotal role in this scenario. The socialization of children holds great

importance as they impact each other's preferences for products. This process, known as consumer socialization (Ward, 1974), entails young people acquiring the skills, knowledge, and abilities necessary to become consumers. While this socialization starts within the home, it takes shape early (before the age of 12) due to an independent and distinctive perspective on shopping. This viewpoint is a result of intentional advertising tactics, as children's commercials are designed to elicit emotional and cognitive responses. These advertisements frequently employ real or fabricated testimonials and portray 'ideal consumers' with whom they can relate. Often, these 'ideal consumers' are children or teenagers older than the target audience. Further persuasion strategies include appealing to values, provocation, and peer pressure (Callea & Urbini, 2011).

Through a questionnaire, the study aimed to investigate the influence of TV commercials for games and toys on parents. The objective was to uncover parental behaviour regarding the selection of games and toys, preferred toy types, the criteria underlying these choices, parental consumer values, methods of child consumer socialization at home, promotion (or lack thereof) of anti-consumerism, responses to advertisements, and values parents seek to inspire in their children. Conversely, the study sought to understand children's behaviour from the parental perspective, including their desire for toys promoted in ads, strategies employed to request them from parents or relatives, influence from friends, and the presence of materialistic values like collecting games and toys.

The research hypotheses were as follows:

1. When choosing a game or toy, parents consider the role of that toy in their child's development, but frequently make purchases based on children's desires.

2. Materialism is influenced by parents through purchasing frequency, consumer choices, and the promotion of anti-consumerism within the family.

3. Advertising of games and toys is overly aggressive and poses challenges for parents and children, prompting many parents to desire restrictions on children's TV channels.

The process of consumer socialization contributes to a child's becoming an active consumer in the market. Games and toys play a role in this process as they depict adulthood, commercials convey ideals, and parents influence and shape children's behaviours. Children observe these ideals in advertisements and further internalize them during play, thereby learning and adopting these behaviours. Parents, being decision-makers for purchases, influencers of consumer socialization, and conveyors of values, play a significant role in shaping their children's attitudes. This study aims to understand how parents perceive their children being exposed to commercials that convey certain values.

The scope of media and communication studies has sometimes been restricted due to psychology and child psychology failing to adequately address the media's influence on children. As a result, children are often portrayed as vulnerable and easily influenced individuals. Yet, this perspective limits the understanding of children's interactions with the adult world through various media and technologies, and how it might influence their attitudes, emotions, and behaviours (Den Bulck & Den Bergh, 2005).

The objective of this study is to determine the influence parents attribute to toys and games in promoting values. By comprehending parents' viewpoints on the presented values, particularly materialism, the aim is to understand how parents contribute to the development of subsequent consumer behaviours. As previously discussed, games serve as

a way for children to explore and adapt to their environment. Following social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) games provide a platform for children to learn about and navigate their surroundings. This article presents the preliminary results of this research.

Findings

The survey was conducted among 336 parents in Romania through a convenience sampling method. The respondents' ages ranged from 25 to 55 years old, with around 30% falling between 30 to 35 age range, 32% between 35 to 40, approximately 16% between 25 and 30, 14% between 40 to 45, and the remaining falling in the 45 to 55 age range. These parent participants have one or more children within the ages of 4 to 12. Specifically, 50% of the children are aged 4 to 6, 30% are aged 6 to 8, 22% are aged 8 to 10, and 23% are aged 10 to 12. The educational background of the parents is distributed relatively evenly, with roughly equal proportions having secondary education, bachelor's degrees, and master's degrees. A smaller percentage, around 5%, possesses doctoral degrees. Children's television viewing habits vary, with some not watching at all and others spending more than 5 hours watching TV. The majority fall within the range of 1 to 3 hours. Similarly, screen time on electronic devices spans from none to over 5 hours, with most children spending less than 2 hours. Concerning games and toys, children primarily engage for 1 to 3 hours daily, though 14% of respondents report that some children spend over 5 hours playing with them. When parents purchase games and toys, they typically prioritize factors like quality, developmental benefits, and practical utility. Less frequently bought are toys involving digital skills, virtual world exploration, video games, and other digital applications. On the other hand, toys that enhance motor skills, cognitive abilities, social interaction, and creative imagination are more favoured. The majority of parents believe that the toys they buy contribute positively to their children's learning and development.

Regarding the frequency of toy purchases, 38% buy toys once a month, 34.5% occasionally or on special occasions, 13% buy twice a month, and 10% buy weekly. Among these purchases, 54% of parents acknowledge buying toys on special occasions or occasionally when not necessary. Additionally, 17% purchase toys once a month, while approximately the same number, 17%, never buy unnecessary toys. Often, the motivation for purchasing non-essential toys is to provide joy and surprises for their children. Around 60% of parents note that their children collect toys and store them at home. In terms of family consumption values, about 67% of parents express careful consideration in their purchasing decisions. Roughly half of the respondents, 47%, actively promote anti-consumerism within their families, employing strategies like explaining purchases, setting budgets, and limiting unnecessary expenditures. Around 45% of parents claim that advertisements rarely influence their decisions when buying toys and games (less than 10% of the time), while approximately 22% state occasional influence (around 30% of the time). Children exhibit varying reactions: 23% rarely desire toys advertised on TV, 19% occasionally, 25% sometimes, and 20% frequently. Peer influence also affects children's preferences, with 40% being significantly influenced by other children's choices. Rozendaal (2013) showed that children with a higher susceptibility to social (peer) influence have a greater desire for brands advertised to them in social games.

When children request toys seen in advertisements, parents commonly utilize strategies like explaining reasons for not purchasing and suggesting alternative options (50% of respondents), offering explanations for not buying (24%), or postponing the purchase (21%). Children's tactics to persuade their parents include nagging (34%), negotiation (32%), promises (27%), persuasion (27%), emotional appeals (21%), and comparisons (19%). Around 4.5% of parents report that their children do not request toys.

Other family members respond differently to toy requests. Most commonly, they delay the purchase for another occasion (38%) or explain why they won't buy the toy and suggest better alternatives (34%). Fewer opt to explain the reasons for not buying (15%), make the purchase immediately (14%), or directly deny the request (5%). Regarding discussions about advertising, around 30% of parents occasionally explain its role to their children, while 25% often do so, and 23% rarely engage in such conversations. Parents also frequently involve their children in the decision-making process when purchasing toys (38% often, 26% sometimes, 28% always). This approach aims to develop skills such as decision-making, negotiation, and money management. To foster responsible consumer behaviour, parents adopt strategies like discussing advertising and its implications (30%), explaining consumption's impact on the environment (27%), choosing sustainable and eco-friendly toys (31%), and sometimes not using any specific strategy (32%). Parents generally perceive TV advertisements for games and toys as pervasive and a concern for both children and parents. However, most parents hold moderate views on whether such advertising should be banned or not. Parents believe that games and toys can significantly influence their children's values and behaviours, with 79% stating they believe this to a large extent. In terms of values parents aim to impart, compassion, kindness, responsibility, loyalty, curiosity, wisdom, learning, family, and friendship are most commonly mentioned. Autonomy, courage, happiness, creativity, and innovation are also promoted, while values like fun, beauty, competition, challenge, abundance, and materialism are less emphasized.

Conclusions

Based on initial research findings, the initial hypothesis is confirmed: When selecting games or toys, parents consider the toy's role in their child's development, but often their purchases align with their children's desires. While parents do take the toy's purpose into consideration, children tend to request toys seen in TV commercials or owned by their peers, leading parents to make those purchases. The second hypothesis is also validated: Materialism is influenced by parents through their buying frequency, consumer choices, and the way they introduce or discourage anti-consumerism values within the family. Parents frequently purchase toys, sometimes they're gifted by relatives, and a significant number of these toys are child-initiated requests. Although parents exercise caution in their buying decisions, fewer than half of the respondents actively promote anti-consumerism values.

The third hypothesis is partially supported: The advertising of games and toys is deemed excessively aggressive, creating challenges for both parents and children. This aligns with the fact that many parents disapprove of certain content advertised on children's TV channels. While parents acknowledge the overly assertive nature of game and toy advertising on television, they do not advocate for an outright ban. A plausible explanation

is that many parents view toy purchases as treats and use advertisements to identify their children's preferences.

On the subject of politics, governments, regulatory bodies, parents, and child-focused organizations in both the United States and the European Union have long expressed concerns about advertising aimed at children. Key worries include children's comprehension of advertisers' motives and their ability to critically respond to persuasive marketing. These concerns have led to bans or restrictions on advertising targeting minors in various countries. For example, advertising to children during prime time is prohibited in Sweden and Norway, and in Greece, advertising a toy is entirely prohibited (Mallalieu et al., 2005). In 2005, Ireland implemented a children's advertising code. The overarching principle guiding these social policies is the protection of vulnerable children from the potentially manipulative tactics employed by advertising agencies (Lawlor & Prothero, 2008).

Acknowledgements

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