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Marketing to Children: The Impact of Digital Media

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Abstract

Children younger than eight lack the cognitive skills to understand the persuasive intent of marketing messages. All integrated marketing strategies, campaigns and messages are channeled to traditional and digital media that increases the scope of media mix and hence the exposure span for children audience increases. The lack of cognitive skills and doubtful recognition of the real story of the advertising message, makes this customers category - children (in multigenerational marketing referred as Generation Z especially vulner- able. Though, the exposure children have on digital and electronic media is increasing the necessity proper marketing communications model that will involve ethical and affirmative content is obvious.

The comparative theoretical analyses of all 4 generations in marketing segmentation obtain to determine key differences and unique consumer behavior of customers. A special emphasis is given to Generation Z in order to understand the sensitivity of children's exposure to media and possible consequences. This paper gives and model for marketing communication and media mix for targeting Generation Z and children by which both parties will benefit: the audience will be protected from possible consequences by inconvenient messaging and the marketers will message a content for better addressing to children customers by means of media mix and content.

Keywords: Children, Generation Z, Integrated Marketing Mix, Communication, Media, Digital, Social.

Introduction

What do you call a consumer who wants to buy everything you have, doesn't care what it costs and is less than five feet tall? A marketer's dream? Nope. You call them kids. -AdRelevance Intelligence Report, 2000.

Regarded as customers, children until age of 8-9 years have underdeveloped cognitive decision-making abilities, hence can not be fully defined as consumers and are unqualified to make far-sighted purchase decision as adults. This situation needs to be alarmed among all marketing and media related parties due to the fact that the exposure of children to marketing messages is increasing, on both traditional and digital media, which may create a

situation that has serious implications.
Within generational development, the Generation Z is tech savvy, more independent and much individualistic in psycho-behavioral aspect. Since children, as well as all individuals of Generation Z are active customers, directly or indirectly, the brand referring to them need to take into account this fragile state.

Literature Review

The theory has been discussing on the topic of marketing to children with accent on digital media, but still the application of the measures for increased awareness and action are not adequate. Unlike theory, the industry of advertising is lacking policies, models and concerns about this issue. For the purpose of this paper 70 papers and article were scanned out of 3 disciplines: integrated marketing communications, digital media, and psychology. The theory highlights the increase of digital media in general. Social media increases exposure and traffic (Stelzner, 2014), creates business and consumer relationships (Icha & Agwu, 2015). The literature shows that although there is little difference in use between genders, not surprisingly there are differences in age, with a significant increase in use as children grow older (ITU 2008; Livingstone and Haddon 2009). However, further on the majority of authors agree that generation Y and generation Z differ in many aspect and further modeling of advertising industry is urgent.

Methodology

For the purpose of this research case study of different industry ads is used as a research design as it has some flexibility in the methods of data collection than other designs. The research was conducted in Macedonia, where primary data were collected with the use of interview and questionnaire among children divided in 2 age groups and their parents. Respondents were selected by using simple random sampling. Secondary data were collected through various websites, journals, and newspapers in review on social media. Data were processed and analyzed with the use of qualitative and quantitative methods. This involved examination of data and information in numerical and non-numerical approaches.

The Concept of Multigenerational Marketing

Customers belonging to one of the existing age groups have similar interests, observations, standards and lifestyles that influence their consumer behavior and define their characteristics as consumers. The understanding of unique characteristics of different age groups ensures solid base for marketers aiming to create applicable marketing communications strategies (Howell, 2012).
The Baby Boomers were born during 1946-1964 during the dramatic increase of births between the end of World War II and 1964. (Williams and Page, 2010). Boomers largely identify themselves with their professional vocations and many are recognizing themselves as workaholics. (Koco, 2006) Beside professional achievements, also, family bonds are important to Boomers. (Dietz, 2003) Health, vitality, and wellness are major goals for them, hence, Baby Boomers are good customers for traveling, expensive restaurant meals, maintenance-free homes, personal trainers, motorcycles, and financial advisors.
Generation X was born during 1965-1980 and reached maturity during difficult economic times; hence, professional rise for this generation has been much more challenging. They are likely to be self-employed professionals who embrace freelancing over company loyalty (Cranston, 2008). In terms of social life, they grew up rapidly, experiencing rising divorce rates

and domestic violence, but still they value family first. They are highly educated, but pessimistic, skeptical, even sarcastic for most of things (Moore and Carpenter, 2008). Generation X as customers is much insecure and hesitative. Marketers should mind their low level of loyalty toward brands (Williams and Page, 2010).

Generation Y was born between years 1980 – 2000. They are children of the Baby Boomers and grew up in a time of constant economic and global change such as rise of woman leaders, major ethnic and cultural mixture, social awareness, technological and digital expansion, and globalization. Eight key values have been described for Gen Y: choice, customization, scrutiny, integrity, collaboration, speed, entertainment, and innovation (Donnelly, 2008). Millennials are known as the hyper-connected and technology-savvy crowds that interact on social media or the Boomerang generation that go back to live with their parents.

Generation Z is the youngest living generation and these individuals are born after 2001. They have witnessed economic downturn, global crisis and parallel negative trends that lead to their loss of childhood (Bashford, 2010). However, Generation Z individuals are self-controlled, conscious and responsible. They are contented to high-tech and multimedia devices, and never lived without the Internet. They are opportunists, and tend to use fantasy and illusions. They are least loyal to employers and brands. The basic three key characteristics of Generation Z are: instant gratification, success, and liberal social values (Williams and Page, 2010). Fashionable wardrobe, music, fashion, cosmetics, and on line games are very important products for Generation Z. As a major part of Generation Z - children are able to recognize brands from the age of about 18 months; whish arouses attention concerning moral and ethical issues when creating a messages (Calvet, 2008). According to Calvet, children younger than eight are especially vulnerable to mass media marketing messages because they lack the cognitive skills to understand the persuasive intent of television and online advertisements. Marketers should be aware that Generation Z is easy dealing and manipulating with technological devices and hence easily exposed to digital and social media.

Cognitive Development and Advertising

Two important information-processing tasks are required for any person to achieve a mature understanding of advertising messages. First, the individual must be able to distinguish between commercial and noncommercial content (programs). Research shows indicate that those below the ages of 8 years do not consistently distinguish program from commercial content, even when program/commercial separation devices are used.

The second essential cognitive task involved in a mature comprehension of advertising is the ability to recognize the persuasive intent of advertising and to apply that knowledge in the child's understanding of the advertising message.

The Buying Behavior of Children

Children and teens (Geberation Z) have many unique features when observed as customers. In general, children have higher sensitivity on graphics and visuals in packaging and design then adults. Children audience is particularly sensitive to bright colors, loud music, and rapid changes in stimulus. On youngest age, children (0-2 years old) show interest in sounds, effects, animation, humor, female and children voices (Lemish, 2007). Similarly, a child is able to briefly remember a presented message especially of those advertisements where personification and animation, symbols and mascots are applied. It means when you give an inanimate object some human characteristic or there are speaking animals in the ad, children on age 1 and 2 are highly interested. Pre-school children (3-6 years old) are attracted by

messages with marionettes, animation in logical narratives (Lemish, 2007) as well as with fantasy elements (Šramová, 2007). In sales promotion, a bonus, i.e. added value to purchased goods, is often attached. School-age children (7-12 years old) are fon of messages, educational programs, sci-fi, as well as stories with heroes. Popular TV series characters become their idols and those who recommend certain products, as well celebrities influence largely on brands and products preferences. Addiction on a reference from a popular star or sports person may be observed even more in teenagers (12+) who appreciate practical values while shopping on-line. Playing computer games and chatting on the Internet are the most preferred leisure activities of all members of Generation Z, and by this fact they become an easily accessible group for viral marketing and on line product post (Šramová, Džupina & Jurášková, 2013).

The core problem when targeting children is manly psychological and strongly related with cognitive skill development. Two important information processing tasks are required for any person to achieve a mature understanding of advertising messages. First, the individual must be able to distinguish between commercial and noncommercial content. In other words, an individual must be able to differentiate the ads from the programs (Calvet, 2008). Studies of children indicate that those below the ages of 4–5 years do not consistently distinguish program from commercial content. As children reach the age of 4–5 years, they typically perceive a categorical distinction between commercials and programming, but primarily on the basis of affective ("commercials are funnier") or perceptual ("commercials are shorter") cues only.

The second essential cognitive task involved in a mature understanding of advertising is the ability to recognize the influential intent of advertising message. Namely, mature persuasive intent comprehension involves the acknowledgement that the advertiser has aim to persuade their audience to want to buy their products.

Basic developmental research on egocentrism and perspective taking, along with a great deal of evidence specifically examining developmental differences in the comprehension of persuasive intent within advertisements, establishes clearly that most children younger than 7–8 years of age do not recognize the persuasive intent of commercial appeals.

The Children and the Media Today

The set of application of digital media are profoundly different from traditional media, including elements such as interactivity, engagement, viral messaging, user-generated content, and location-based targeting.

Children and teens still spend more time watching TV than they do using any other type of media, an average of approximately one hour a day among 2- to 8-year-olds and more than two-and-a-half hours a day of live TV among those 8 and older (Rideout et al., 2010).

At this media, many legal and ethical measures are being taken over the years aiming to decrease the negative implications. However, the core reason for concern is the branded program and embedded brands, logos and messages. Research indicates children have a harder time identifying “embedded” content as advertising and understanding the persuasive intent behind it (Owen et al., 2013). At this point, there simply are no accurate measures of the extent or impact of young people’s exposure to product placements and other types of embedded advertising.

Advertising to children and teens continues to be conducted on cross-promotional associations with popular cartoon characters, sports stars, and movie and music celebrities. However, there is no available set of instruments within the research community for tracking

children's exposure to such campaigns.
Online advertising includes banners, reviews and editorials on web cites, platforms, and social media. Also, involves games, apps, online videos, virtual worlds, and social marketing (Rideout, 2014).
Today's online advertising represents a "fundamentally different" type of exposure from that of TV or print (Moore & Rideout, 2007; Montgomery, 2012) for several reasons:
• It is interactive, meaning the child actively engages with the brand
• It is also often "immersive," meaning that the child or adolescent is in a fully branded "environment" for an extended period of time
• And most importantly**,** online advertising is essentially different from other media because it can be built on data about the child or teenager that allows it to be targeted to them based on their interests, locations, and demographic characteristics.

The Major Concerns for Advertiser Targeting Children
At this point marketing industry lack even the most basic research needed for policymakers to determine whether certain types of practices of marketing to children are fair or cause certain misconceptions. The core question is how does a child evaluate and distinguish an information received by visiting food company's website and by playing a branded advergame on his or hers parents mobile phone? How does he or she process the brand cues in a mobile game? How a teen does perceives a tweet from a celebrity inviting him or her to view a new YouTube video sponsored by a soda company? (Rideout, 2014). And even more, how does a child evaluate a candy brand sponsored ad on social media? Are there methods and instruments to label sponsored content that would have a meaningful impact on young people's ability to distinguish advertising messages from entertainment content, as ad "bumpers" do on TV? And even more, are there global policies for involving a child psychologist in creative marketing team when concerting the message whenever there is a possibility to be aired on wide audience, regardless if the campaign targets the kids directly or indirectly?
In sum, there has been a revolution in the world of advertising and marketing to children and teens, and the research we need to fully understand its effects is lacking. (Rideout, 2014). Still, there are many reasons to be concerned about advertising's impact on young people: it often promotes products with health implications, such as fast food, soda, and candy; there are public-policy implications on issues such as privacy and fairness; some parents and promoters are concerned about the over-commercialization of childhood; children can be exposed to advertising for adult-oriented products such as alcohol, tobacco, and violent media; and children's advocates and public health experts need to stay current on the most effective techniques for reaching young people with messages that will benefit their healthful growth.
The growth in media channels for advertising targeting children has been development trend of many alarms. Many children nowadays have unsupervised access to computers, cell phones and other that directly expose them to content absent parental monitoring and supervision.
These two trends—the growth in advertising channels reaching children and the increase of children's media use—have resulted in a dramatic increase in advertising directly intended for the eyes and ears of children.

Hypotheses

Regarding the question of children's increased exposure to technological and digital devices hypothesis 1 is formed:

H1: Generation Z is predominantly exposed to digital media and mobile advertising including apps and games.

Regarding the problem with cognitive decision-making hypothesis 2 is formed

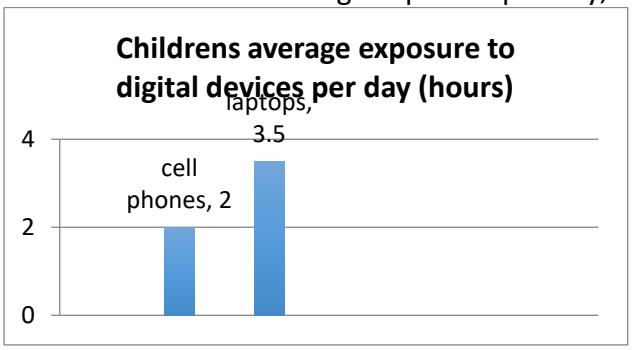
H2: The children have no clear idea weather the message via social media is advertising or information

H3: Generation Z and children preferred recognized products, already advertised on social media more in comparison with unrecognized.

Research and Discussion

For the purpose of this research a survey was conducted of 57 individuals of Generation Y structured in 2 age based subcategories. Group 1 consisted of 29 children age 2-9. Group 2 consisted of 28 children age 10-15. Males accounted for 45% of the respondents, while females accounted for 55%. Additionaly, for the H1, 51 parents of the surveyed children were involved in the research.

Regarding H1, related to the children's exposure to digital devices, the surveyed parents gave clear answer that their children's exposure on computer, laptop or personal mobile phone is not monitored. The average exposure per day, as they assumed is around 5,5 hours In total.



In addition of this question, the responses about the strength of monitoring while exposing the children to digital devices, were that mostly they are not monitored (89%).

Regarding H2, the surveyed children of all ages were shown two posters: one of a healthy meal infografic and second of pizza delivery advertisement. 91% of the children of subgroup 1 showed confusion being asked to tell the difference of the nutritions infografic and the pizza ad, claiming both are food information, while children of second subcategory in 100% without hesitation made clear distinction between the advertisement and recipe tutorial.

As of H3, the survived children of all 3 subgroups were asked to choose cotton shirts, 1 out of 5. One was with Batman symbol, one was Nike, on was with random dog, and the rest were pink, yellow and green. The response of this question was not confirming fully the hypothesis that children re attracted to superheroes or brands. The dominant male children chose the green bag (70%) and the female children choose the pink one (89%). Batman bag (although all of them were aware of this icon) was chosen also, but in a fewer scale than expected. This situation-supported idea that children are sensitive to colors more that superheroes or brands.

Overall, children show completely different consumer behavior than adults. The high sensitivity to colors and medium ignorance of popular mascots created necessity of taking step further in observing marketing to children as sensitive and serious matter.

Conclusion

Regardless of age, all individuals of Generation Z – children and teens are over exposed to a digital devices and social media. The marketing communication happening there is already step ahead of control and by researching it we come to realize how much the industry and academy is not updated. Meanwhile, the Generation Z individuals are developing in specific and unique segment, having strong relations with technology and internet. This two trend alert for policy makers and advertisers to take measures for controlling this process in favor of developing healthy generations and setting a fair economic standards for targeting this customers.

Following the trend of some countries that are taking steps towards protecting children from ads, many European governments have placed restrictions on television commercials targeting kids. But in most of the countries in the world do not seem to understand the problem. This should become a matter of global policy for marketing to children applied in every country, especially applicable in digital media.

Other set of instruments would predict involving psychologist when creating advertisement that would address to children directly or indirectly. And finally, educating marketers, advertisers and everybody involved in brand and marketing industry about this concern.

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