

Article

Parental perceptions of toys and games marketing

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Abstract: Games and toys play a significant role in children's consumer socialization, shaping their understanding of societal norms through play. Advertisements by businesses often convey specific values to promote and sell these items. Parents, as key influencers, impact their children's behaviour by making purchasing decisions and monitoring advertising's influence. This research investigates parents' perceptions of toy and game marketing through in-depth interviews with 20 participants. Findings revealed that parents recognize the importance of games and toys in their children's development and evaluate products based on their values and children's desires. However, the study also identifies parents' limited media literacy skills and susceptibility to promotional tactics. The impact of values promoted by toy businesses on children raises ethical concerns and calls for marketing regulations. Understanding these dynamics is critical for safeguarding children's well-being and balanced development in the consumer world.

Keywords: marketing, toys and games, parental perspectives;

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INTRODUCTION

Parents play an important role in purchasing decisions for their children, including buying toys and games. To influence these decisions children use their power over adults, known as “pester power” (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2008, pp. 349-353; Solomon, 2013, pp. 457-461; Sutherland & Thompson, 2003, pp. 115-116; Acuff, 1997, p. 276; Lawlor & Prothero, 2011). Consumer socialization, which shapes children's consumer behavior, involves children imitating their parents (Sutherland & Thompson, 2003, pp. 115-116; Acuff, 1997, p. 276; Ahn, 2021). As advertisements convey values and parents model these values to their children, parents' role is crucial in shaping the impact of advertisements (Ahn, 2021; Mendoza, 2009).

The purpose of this study is to investigate parents' perceptions of the values depicted in marketing for games and toys. It explores how parents interact with advertisement content, how they comprehend and explain it to their children, so contributing to consumer socialization and media literacy. This understanding is necessary for managing today's information- and product-saturated culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding parents' perceptions of the values promoted by toy and game marketing requires insights into concepts like consumer socialization, games and toys, marketing strategies, particularly advertising, and values. Games and toys serve as vehicles for transmitting values to children, shaping their worldview, with advertising playing a significant role in influencing children's behaviour based on the depicted values. These values represent the fundamental elements of behaviour and form an integral part of the consumer socialization process. The primary objective of this research is to explore parents' perceptions regarding the values conveyed in advertisements for children's games and toys. By considering the element of perception, the aim is to gain a comprehensive understanding of how parents interpret the values promoted through such marketing practices.

Consumer socialization - the role of parents

Consumer socialization depends on several factors: consumer skills, where children learn how the buying process works, comparing products, and assessing costs; consumer preferences, where values, attitudes and behaviours contribute to product or brand evaluation; consumer attitudes towards advertising and other forms of promotion (Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016, pp. 204-205).

Children acquire these skills through learning, modelling and imitation, primarily influenced by their interaction with parents. Brands capitalize on family-friendly values to appeal to children's consumer behaviour (Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016, pp. 205-206; Barrie, 2015, p. 78).

Television also plays a crucial role in influencing children's perceptions of consumption and values. Children absorb messages about consumption and behavior from TV content, and extended exposure can lead them to perceive these representations as real (Solomon, et al., 2013, pp. 457-461). Parental restrictions on TV content may lead to fewer demands from children, while shared TV viewing with parents can enhance children's attempts to influence them (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2008, pp. 349-353; Solomon et al., 2013, pp. 457-461).

Children use their “pester power” to influence parents, employing various strategies from persistent nagging to negotiation or persuasion (Sutherland & Thompson, 2003, pp. 115-116; Acuff, 1997, p. 276). Parents respond with different strategies, including expert authority (the knowledge they have), legitimate power or directive parenting strategies. These types of strategies also determine the type of household, these can be authoritarian households where the emphasis is on obedience, democratic households where children can also show their influence, or permissive households where there are no constraints (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2008, pp. 349-353; Mothersbaugh & Hawkins, 2016, pp. 198-207; Solomon et al., 2013, pp. 457-461).

Research has explored family dynamics, revealing that parents generally value their relationships with their children, but parenting is challenging due to time management, balancing work and family life, performance expectations, financial pressures, and consumerism (Sidebotham, 2001). Today's children are well-informed, internet-savvy, and actively engage in shopping with their parents, while still considering the family as their most significant social group (North & Poggio, 2001).

Play – the role in child development

Crawford (2003) describes the concept of play based on Marie Laure-Ryan's framework, which introduces a distinction between two aspects: ludus and paidia. Ludus refers to structured play with defined rules that demand effort, dedication, and creativity from participants. On the other hand, paidia embodies unstructured and spontaneous play characterized by fun, excitement, improvisation, and imagination.

Play is very useful for children's development because it develops not only the cognitive and

physical areas but also social and emotional aspects. Through play, parents and educators can better connect with the child by using games and toys as a tools. The way games and toys have been perceived has changed over time. From being tools for children's activity, they have become essential for the child's brain development (Calvert & Wilson, 2008). This shift occurred because it has been observed that play and imagination are vital tools through which the child internalizes behaviours and values (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Play has thus become a topic of debate that balances the child's need for leisure with the child's vulnerability and the need for protection from games and toys containing negative symbols. In the second perspective, there is often anxiety that toys imply undesirable values such as materialism, which the child can internalize through play (Best, 1998).

The way games and toys are culturally valued differs from one culture to another and from one socio-economic group to another. While in Western countries play is viewed as a tool for children's cognitive and social development, in less developed, more traditionalist countries, play has less obvious importance (Roopnarine, 2010). In this way, children can also view appropriate behaviours differently, either according to gender or according to cultural norms in different cultures (Pfeiffer & Butz, 2005).

Values transmitted through marketing

Marketing is the process of creating, communicating, distributing and exchanging goods that benefit consumers, organisations, stakeholders and society as a whole (Kerin & Hartley, 2009). Advertising can be categorized into two forms: non-paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods and services by an identified payer (Armstrong & Kotler, 2000), and paid attempts to persuade through the media (O'Guinn & Semenik, 2000).

The generally accepted definition of a value, proposed by Milton Rokeach (1968), is "an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or ultimate state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite mode of conduct" (1968, p. 5). "Values are an integral and daily part of our lives. They determine, regulate and modify the relationships between individuals, organisations, institutions and societies" (Agle & Caldwell, 1999). Values are organized into hierarchical systems that endure over time, influencing the beliefs and behaviors of individuals (Rokeach, 1968). It is important to consider values while studying consumer or advertising choices. Toys serve as tools through which children explore

symbols of the adult world, including roles, relationships, and consumer expectations, all of which are mirrored in play (Kline, 2018, 15-32; Reich, Black, & Foliaki, 2017).

Not only the games convey symbols, but the way they are promoted through advertisements also communicates ideals, desires, and values (Avraham & First, 2003). Advertisements reflect the preferences of specific consumers groups, and they play a significant role in shaping society and culture, influencing individuals's perception, attitudes and behaviours (Pollay & Gallagher, 1990; Vandana & Lenkab, 2014). In this context, it becomes crucial to ensure that promotional messages are responsible and promote games that aid children's development (Gardner et al., 2012). Contemporary advertising formats primarily rely on subtle emotional associations rather than rational or factual messages, enabling them to influence children implicitly and divert them from explicit knowledge of persuasion (Nairn & Fine, 2008). "While people believe they are expressing themselves and seeking happiness, they are developing, monitoring and shaping their identities according to the unrealistic ideals perpetuated by the culture of consumerism through advertising" (Dittmar, 2007).

A research study conducted in Denmark aimed to understand children's Christmas wishes and compared them with brands advertised on TV. The research findings indicated that 51.6% of the children surveyed expressed a desire for at least one brand that had been advertised during the study period. Age, gender, and the level of exposure to the channel airing the most commercials were significant predictors of product desires (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2000).

Perception

In marketing, perception refers to how individuals select, process and interpret information to form a representative image of their world (Kačaniová, 2013). Communication is a fundamental process that underpins relationships and promotion. Perception plays a crucial role in communication, as it influences how we understand the messages and their outcomes. Through perception, we decide which messages to internalize and the meaning we assign to them. Many hypotheses suggest that human behaviour is driven by the perception of reality, rather than reality itself. In the context of consumer behaviour, studying perception aims to comprehend consumer decisions and influence the buying process (Vos & Schoemaker, 2006). In terms of consumer behavior, studying perception helps understand consumer decisions and influence the buying process. Marketing and advertising concepts

like brand image, brand positioning, brand personality, and memory retention heavily rely on initial and past perceptions (Kačániová, 2013). Marketing has a significant influence on a child's attitudes towards products and brands, even though children themselves may not directly purchase products until a certain age, and their parents are the ones making the actual purchases (Pine & Nash, 2002). Thus, the role of the purchaser, responsible for actual purchases, becomes crucial. Children's socialization plays a vital role as they influence each other's product preferences. Consumer socialization refers to the process through which young individuals acquire essential skills, knowledge, and abilities that shape their development as consumers (Ward, 1974). The process of consumer socialization initiates within the family environment and further evolves at an early age (under 12 years) as children develop an independent and personal perspective on purchasing. Advertising plays a deliberate role in this process, as ads targeted at children are designed with emotional and cognitive stimuli to attract and persuade them. Testimonials, both real and fictional, and images of "ideal consumers" whom children can relate to, are often used in these ads (Nolte & Harris, 2006) in (Callea & Urbini, 2011). Additionally, value appeals, provocation, and peer pressure serve as additional incentives for persuasion (Callea & Urbini, 2011). From a policy perspective, both European Union and United States governments, along with regulators, parents, and children's groups, have expressed long-standing concerns regarding advertising directed at children. One critical issue revolves around children's ability to comprehend the commercial intent behind advertisements and their capacity to resist persuasive messaging. As a result, certain countries have implemented bans or limitations on advertising to children. For instance, Sweden and Norway have prohibited advertising to children during prime time, while Greece has banned toy advertisements altogether (Mallalieu, Palan, & Laczniack, 2005). In 2005, Ireland introduced a Children's Advertising Code to address social concerns and safeguard children who could be susceptible to powerful and compelling messages from advertisers. The primary objective of this social policy was to provide protection for children in the advertising context (Lawlor & Prothero, 2008).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Consumer socialisation refers to the process through which children learn to become active consumers in the marketplace. Games and toys play a role in this process as they introduce to children the adult world, while advertisements embody values and parents influence their behaviour and choices. Children internalise these behaviours and values by observing advertisements and engaging in play. It is parents who influence consumer socialisation, who are responsible for purchasing decisions and who transmit values to children.

The aim of this research is to explore parents' perceptions of the values conveyed through the marketing of toys and games. We want to understand how parents relate to these values and their perception of the way games and toys are promoted in TV commercials.

Games, as we have shown above, are the way in which a child discovers and adapts to the world in which they live. Advertising strategies, according to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), are ways in which children learn and discover the world they live in. We want to understand how parents relate to values and what is their perception of the way games and toys are promoted in TV commercials.

To achieve these three objectives we set:

1. Identify parents' perceptions of the role of games and toys.
2. Investigate parents' perceptions of the values conveyed through games and toys marketing.
3. Examine parents' media literacy skills and susceptibility to promotional methods.

Our research hypothesis is that parents may have a negative perception of the way games and toys are marketed, but when choosing toys, they prioritize known brands regardless of the values they convey. To test this hypothesis three working hypotheses were used:

1. Parents understand the role of games and toys in children's development.
2. Parents evaluate games and toys based on the values they promote but make purchase decisions according to their children's preferences.
3. Parents have limited media literacy skills and are easily influenced by promotional methods.

The data will be treated, analysed, and interpreted using communication content analysis. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using Nvivo software. The analysis involved coding the responses based on key research concepts, such as the role of games and toys, values, advertisements, and consumer socialization behavior.

FINDINGS

Twenty parents from Iasi county were interviewed, selected based on the age of their children, who ranged between 4 and 12 years old. Regarding socio-demographic criteria, the interviewees had the following characteristics: the average age of the parents was 37.3 years, 18 had higher education, and 2 had secondary education. Out of these, 9 had medium income, and 11 had high income. In terms of gender, 5 were fathers, and 15 were mothers. Regarding marital status, 18 were married, one mother was divorced, and one was single. Considering the number of children, the analysis focused on the age range of 4-12 years, and only children falling within this range were considered. Thus, the 20 parents interviewed had a total of 32 children in this age group.

Regarding screen time, the duration varied from a minimum of one hour to a maximum of six hours per day. Eight parents allowed their children to spend only one hour per day on TV, four parents allowed 1 to 2 hours, five parents allowed 2 to 3 hours, and three parents permitted more than 4 hours on TV or electronic devices. Even parents without a TV at home or those who restricted TV watching acknowledged that their children were exposed to commercials elsewhere, influencing their desire for certain toys.

The results will be presented for each working hypothesis, and finally, we will present the conclusions for the research hypothesis.

Working Hypothesis 1 aimed to assess parents' perceptions of the purpose of games and toys, the types of toys purchased, the selection process, and the promoted desires. The majority of responses regarding the role of toys emphasized their educational value, contributing to children's development and skill improvement, as well as their entertainment value, making children happy and providing enjoyment or occupation. Most mentioned toys purchased included puzzles, building games, dolls, plush toys, and social games. Parents considered factors like quality, usefulness, children's preferences, and price when making choices. Although parents claimed not to have favorite brands, Lego, Noriel, Carrefour, and Emag were frequently mentioned.

Working Hypothesis 1 findings confirmed that parents understand the role of toys and buy them with the intention of contributing to their children's development and enjoyment. Toy purchases align with this understanding, encompassing construction games, puzzles, family board games, educational card games, and plush toys. Notably, the brands

purchased often coincide with those promoted through TV advertisements.

Working Hypothesis 2 explored the values parents hold dear, the values they seek to instill in their children, consumer socialization, and purchase frequency. Most parents demonstrated a clear understanding of values, associating them with guiding principles passed down through generations and the foundation of education: "Some principles of life are eventually passed on from generation to generation or to those we surround ourselves with. They reflect what we value in ourselves or others, and what we aim to cultivate further"; "The values we pass on to our children form the foundation of their education. They are essential as they are instilled in the child and will guide them into adulthood. From my perspective, it is crucial to explain these values, even in minor situations"; "For instance, they serve as landmarks in my life". Other parents associated values with the usefulness of the toy, its price or its emotional value.

Common values emphasized were kindness, empathy, responsibility, faith, family, love, discipline, patience, and patriotism.

The choice of a toy is influenced by its usefulness, quality, and children's preferences. When explaining their choices to their children, few parents engage in detailed discussions. Instead, they might say they don't have the money, it's not worth it, or there are already too many toys. Some parents postpone the purchase, assuming that the child won't understand the reasons. Children's desires for certain toys often arise from exposure to advertisements, seeing toys at other children, or encountering them in stores. These strategies align with those identified in previous research related to "nagging", or "pester power" (Sutherland & Thompson, 2003, pp. 115-116), (Acuff, 1997, p. 276).

Responses regarding the frequency of toy purchases varied, with some parents buying toys once or twice a month, while others make purchases more frequently. For instance, one parent stated, "Nonstop I buy toys, I can't leave without buying a toy from Carrefour. We buy quite often and a lot". Another parent mentioned buying toys twice a week, while another said, "Once or twice a month, but he has a lot". Some parents purchase toys every two weeks or every month, while others buy only on special occasions such as name days, Christmas, or Easter.

A significant number of parents interviewed acknowledge that they have an abundance of toys, with one stating "I don't know what we don't have, we have a room full of toys", and another saying, "We have enough bags of toys, I don't have anything else to take, but they see and want more, and they say let's take this one too". On the other hand, some

parents have fewer toys either due to limited space or because they do not encourage consumerism. One parent expressed concerns about excessive consumerism in young children and the need to teach them to be thrifty, saying, "I think there is too much consumerism, even in young children, and we don't teach them to be thrifty, and I see this in a lot of parents, and it bothers me, it bothers me with these tons of plastic".

The parents' responses align with the stated hypothesis: indeed, parents evaluate games and toys based on the values they promote, but they ultimately choose products according to their children's preferences. Consequently, children's exposure to toys in advertisements and stores leads to numerous purchases, resulting in their rooms being filled with toys and games.

Regarding Hypothesis 3, it explored parents' advertising literacy skills. When asked if toys promote values, parents' initial reaction is to deny that toys have such an influence. However, upon further discussion and role-playing or explanations, they eventually acknowledge that games can indeed promote values. Social games and Lego are particularly mentioned in this context.

During the interview, parents watched three TV commercials for games and toys. The majority of parents' responses closely align with the findings of the previous research, the content analysis. They were able to identify the values conveyed in the advertisements, both based on the words used and the visuals presented. Most parents appreciated the advertisements and believed that their child would also express interest in the toy. Some parents indicated they would consider making the purchase, while others would not. However, there were instances where parents identified aspects that bothered them, such as the promotion of unrealistic or fake features in the toy, the encouragement of consumerism, or the perception that the toy was not genuinely beneficial: "I think it's silly to make children think that something fake is real", "I think it's a toy that promotes consumerism, I wouldn't buy it", "This is the kind of ad with flashy visuals, but in reality, it doesn't offer any real benefits. It's just a cheap trick that appeals to impulsive buying, and it doesn't serve any purpose. It's just another useless item to clutter the house".

There are two forms of reaction to advertisements; some parents feel annoyed by the large number of aggressive advertisements that appear everywhere. They express their concerns about the loud music, strong colors, and the persuasive nature of the ads. They believe that children may not critically think about the content and simply desire the products promoted. They find the abundance of plastic toys

and dolls with surprise boxes to be excessive and worry about the impact on children. Some parents even mute the TV to avoid constant exposure to these ads. But there are also parents who don't find these ads so negative. On one hand, they help them stay informed about what's new in the market. On the other hand, they assist them in understanding their children's desires. Seeing their children's excitement and enjoyment becomes a strong incentive to make purchases. Some parents view these ads simply as a necessary means of promotion in the market.

Working hypothesis 3 does not hold up, parents have some literacy skills and are not easily manipulated by promotional methods. However, there are issues that bother them. Children's extensive exposure to marketing information leads to increased desires and minor conflicts in the family. The aggressiveness and omnipresence of advertisements in all media channels are particularly troubling. Additionally, certain messages in ads encourage impulse buying and premature maturation, which is concerning to parents.

CONCLUSIONS

The research hypothesis we started with was that parents have a negative perception of how games and toys are promoted, but when choosing toys, they prioritize known brands, regardless of the values they convey. Parents' responses confirm this hypothesis. Many parents notice the aggressiveness of the messages, the cosmetic presentation of products, and the increase in impulsiveness, but these aspects do not significantly influence their purchases. Parents end up buying from Noriel, the store that runs a significant number of TV and online ads, as well as from Lego or LoL.

The parents interviewed understand the role of advertising and can identify the values depicted in the advertisements, but they do so only after connecting these values to the toys they buy. Initially, some parents deny that toys or their advertisements promote values. However, upon analysing the content of an advertisement, they can identify the illustrated values well.

Most parents complain about the aggressiveness of the ads. Even if they restrict their children from watching ads, they still come into contact with them on platforms like YouTube and games. This annoyance is shared by both children and parents.

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