Children's brand perception

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Abstract: *It is generally known that brands occupy an important role in everyone's life because they are everywhere. Teens (children with ages from 10-11th) represent the most influenced brand generation. Over the years, brands became an important part of a child's personality. Nowadays, a brand help a child to define himself or herself. The purpose of this study is to determine how young consumers perceive brands, with a special focus on Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Danone. Researchers found that there is a connection between the young and the adult consumer. The sample of the study consisted of 30 children, aged 10-12th, pupils from a school in Cluj-Napoca.*

Keywords: *brands, perception, children, consumer, behavior*

In today's society, brands have a major importance for each and every one of us. Day by day we are surrounded by brands. From what we wear, to what we eat and what we buy. But, how this affects children? The aim of this research paper is to find out how children perceive brands in general and specifically, Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Disney and Danone.

Thus, the theme of this research is the perception of brands from children between 10-12 point of view. It is important to know how they perceive brands because the brands they use now, will probably influence their future consumer behavior. The reason I choose this theme is strictly related to the connection between young children's consumer behavior and adult consumer behavior. Ross and Harradine[1]

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1 See J. Ross., Harradine R. *I'm not wearing that! Branding and young children,* Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, 2004, 8 (1), 11-26, p. 25

researchers found that the connection between a brand and a consumer is stronger if it's developed in childhood.

Research hypothesis

1. Children recognize the logo of the brands participating in the study.
2. Children are able to distinguish certain products as belonging to the companies in the study.

Methodology

The method used in this study is focus-group. Focus-group is a type of group interview and a qualitative research method. The goal of the focus-group is to obtain detailed information from the subjects. It is developed on a semi-structural interview with a few elements added[2]. The subjects were 30 children, aged 10-12, pupils at "Liviu Rebreanu School" in Cluj-Napoca.

The brands used in the study were chosen from the Interbrands 2011 Ranking of the Top 100 Brands.[3] The selected brands are Coca-Cola, brand on the 1st position of the top, Danone, 52nd position, McDonald's, 6th position and Disney 9th position.

Literature review

Two Dutchman researchers made a study[4] in order to find out if brand recognition is developed on early-aged children. The sample consisted of 234 children aged 2-8. The results shown that children aged 2-3 recognized two out of three brands logo's and the 8 olds recognized all the logos they were exposed to. The children coming from a family with high economic statue recognized the brands easily.

The Fly Research Institute (USA) made a study in 2010, on a sample consisting of 377 children aged 6 to 11. The results of this study shown that 91% of the children think a product is cool if their friends think the same; 89% think a brand is cool if they see it on TV; 84% consider a brand is cool if all their classmates have it; 82% of the girls consider a brand is cool if their favorite star has it;81% of the boys consider a brand is cool if they saw it on the internet; 45% of the girls will frequently ask the same clothing brand they used before, while only 35% of the boys will do the same;

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2   Alfred Bulai. *Metode de cercetare calitative: focus- grupul în investigația socială*, Paideia, Bucureşti, 2000, p. 34

3   See the top here- http://www.interbrand.com/en/best-global-brands/best-global-brands-2008/best-global-brands-2011.aspx

4   See Buijzen Monick. Valkenburg Patti. *Identifying determinants of young children's brand awareness*, Conference papers- International Communication Associations, 2004, Annual Meeting available in Ebsco Host database http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=45283754&site=ehost-live

42% of the boys will ask their parents to buy toys from certain stores and only 30% of the girls will ask parents to shop from certain clothing stores and supermakets[5].

A study[6] conducted by the National Consumer Council in the United States of America, revealed that 70% of the respondents, three year olds, recognized the McDonald's brand, but only half of them knew their surname. The researchers also found that until the age of 10, a child internalizes approximately 300 brands.

A study[7] conducted by SIS International Research on a 200 adolescents and 150 adults sample, revealed that 56% of the adolescents and 53% of the adults use the same food and beverage brands they used in their childhood. This study is very important because it helps us understand the loyalty a person can have for a brand.

Ji F. Mindy, a researcher at the University of Texas conducted a study[8] entitled *Children's relationships with brands: „True Love" or „One-Night" Stand?*. The sample consisted of a family's children: a seven year old girl and two boys: a nine year old and a thirteen year old. The respondents were asked to tell stories about their brands experiences during a focus-group and afterwards in individual interviews. The questions asked in the private interviews were related to the use of mass-media, relationships, daily activities and their consumer behavior.

During the focus-group, children told 60 stories about their relationship with brands. These relationships were categorized in: *first love* (a child's first love experience with a brand), *true love* (a long-term relationship with a brand), *arranged marriage* (involuntary relationship), *secret admirer* (the child admires a brand and wishes it could be his), *good friend* (the child likes the brand), *fun buddy* (the child associates the brand with fun), *old buddy* (the child used the brand in the past and will also use it in the future), *acquaintance* (the child knows the brand but does not use it, or have any feelings about it), *one-night stand* (the child does not know a lot about the brands and use it seldom), *enmity* (the child hates the brand due to a bad experience with it, or friend's bad experiences with it).

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5   See Costa M. Children's Market: *Brand awareness comes as part of growing up,* Marketing Week, 2010, (01419285), 13-13-15, available in ProQuest database- http://search.proquest.com/docvie w/366323602?accountid=8013

6   See Ashley Jackie. *The brands have turned us into a nation of addicts: Today's children, who so want to be 'cool', are growing up to be the miserable victims of consumer culture*. The Guardian, (2006, Dec 11), p.27, available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/dec/11/comment. children

7   See SIS International Research. *Multiple constituencies and indirect influencers in consumer purchasing*, 7 March 2009, available at http://www.marketintelligences.com/the-market-research-journal/2009/3/7/multiple-constituencies-indirect-influencers-in-consumer-pur.html

8   See Mindy F. Ji. *Children's relationships with brands: „True love" or „One-Night" Stand?*, Psychology & Marketing; Apr2002, Vol. 19 Issue 4, p369-387, 19p available in Ebsco Host database http:// search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=11579456&site=ehost-live

The results of the study are: children developed relationships with a variety of brands and can give details about the experience of using them; they probably became loyal consumers of those brands and last, but not least, children's relationships with brands plays an important role in their lives (these relationships are tools throughout children develop abilities, connect with the others and fulfill their dreams).

Defining brand

Philip Kotler defines brand as "a seller's promise to deliver a specific set of features, benefits and services consistent to the buyers"[9]. Aneta Bogdan[10] considers that the brand is a combination of tangible and intangible attributes, represented by a trademark. The brand represents the valuable element of a business or a company.

A brand represents the perceptions about a product, a business or a service, everything that a consumer knows, hears, reads, feels or thinks about them.[11] The brand has to have a personality, it has to be emotional and to get into people's hearts and minds. The tangible elements of a brand are: logo, advertising, slogan and jingle.

Wally Olins[12] talks about the importance of branding in our days. It has overcome the commercial function and its impact is huge, socially and culturally. Nowadays, products are not bought because people need them, they are bought because people are constrained by cultural and social norms.

Brands are now an important part of a child's personality. Brands can help a child to define himself and this is not a good thing all the time. In a book entitled *Consumer Behavior*, Florin Isac states that „For a child, the possession of an object will permit himself to distinguish from the medium, and later on, to distinguish himself from others. Consumerism will allow him to structure his gender perceptions (feminine, masculine) throughout clothes and toys"[13].

Consumerism now occupies an important place in society. Throughout buying things, one expresses himself and who he would want to be. Self-esteem is now an important consumerism stimulant[14]. As Gabriel Lang[15]states, a consumer does not

9   Philip Kotler. Marketing Management, Englewoods Cliffs, New Jersey Prentice-Hall, 2002, p. 593

10 See Aneta Bogdan. *Branding pe frontul de Est. Despre reputație, împotriva curentului*, Brandient Consult, 2nd edition, Bucharest, 2011, p.34

11 See Philip Kotler. Waldemar Pfoertsch. *B2B Brand management, trad. nos*, Springer, Berlin, 2006, pp. 4-5

12 See Olins Wally. *Despre brand*, 2nd edition, Comunicare.ro, Bucharest, 2003, p. 23

13 Florin Lucian Isac.*Comportamentul consumatorului,* revised edition, Mirton, Timişoara, 2009, p.8

14 See Florin Lucian Isac. *Comportamentul consumatorului.* revised edition, Mirton, Timişoara, 2009, pp.8-9

15 Gabriel Y., Lang. T. *The unmanageable consumer: Contemporary Consumption and its fragmentation,* Sage Publications, 1995, p.87 from Florin Lucian Isac.*Comportamentul consumatorului,* revisez edition, Mirton, Timi?oara, 2009, p.7

always buy products to consume them, but also because he is under the impression that he needs them. It often happens that a consumer buys things because he thinks they are going to help him obtain a superior status in society.

Children's brand perception

In Martin Lindstrom and Patricia Seybold's volume- "Brand child. Remarkable insights into the minds of today's global kids and their relationships with brands", the authors state there are four types of teens: persuaders, edges, followers and reflexives[16]. Persuaders (trendsetters) are the most popular kids, they adapt very quickly to the new trends and they are the ones who lead the group. Edges are the rebel kids- they are characterized by anti-brands and anti-fashion behavior. Edges tend to break the rules, miss school. They are independent trendsetters. Followers, the other category of teens, are the kids who follow persuaders, the kids that will never be the first on anything. Followers usually have a low self-esteem. Reflexives do not follow trends and are somehow antisocial. They have no self-esteem and not so many friends.

Attribution theory

Fritz Heider, thinks that the role of attribution is very important in everyday life. Attribution is similar to the process of knowing the world. One can make predictions, explain the behavior of the people around him and understand his own behavior[17]. The basic element of attribution is social categorization. It is very important to explain the causes of success or failure through internal and external causes because it can help us define one's attribution style[18].

Beenard Weiner, a researcher of a subdomain of attribution theory- attribution of success and failure, proposed a model with two dimensions: stable- instable (personal) and internal- external (situational)[19]. Therefore, there are four types of causes of success or failure: internal and stable (capacity), internal and instable (effort), external and stable (task difficulty) and external and instable (chance).

Attribution of the success or of the failure is a process that can mark the personality of a child and also affect the feeling of his effectiveness. The performances of a pupil will be corelated with the attributions he makes- if he attributes external causes, stable for his failures then he will not have a low self-esteem. In exchange, if he

16 See Martin Lindstrom, Patricia B. Seybold. *Brand child. Remarkable insights into the minds of today's global kids and their relationship with brands*, Kogan Page, London, 2003, p. 13

17 See Fritz Heider. *The psychology of interpersonal relations*, Wiley, New York, 1958, p. 79 in Ioan Radu, Petre Ilu?, Liviu Matei. *Psihologie socială,* Exe, Cluj-Napoca, 1994, p. 51

18 See Ioan Radu, Petre Iluţ, Liviu Matei. *Psihologie socială,* Exe, Cluj-Napoca, 1994, p. 52

19 Mirela Mirea. *Succesul şi insuccesul şcolar*, articol disponibil la adresa http://www.scribd.com/mirela%20mirea/d/17222451-Succesul-Si-Insuccesul-Scolar

attributes internal causes, his self-esteem will be very low. The main assumption of attribution theory is that people try to keep a good image of themselves[20].

The importance of attribution theory for this study is closely related to how children perceive themselves and what they think they deserve. A child that only does internal attributions has no self-esteem and will not think he deserves anything, therefore he will not ask his parents for certain brands.

Methodology

Research hypothesis

1. Children recognize the logo of the brands participating in the study.
2. Children are able to distinguish certain products as belonging to the companies in the study.

The method used in this study is focus-group, a qualitative method. The sample consisted of 30 children, boys and girls, aged between 10 and12, pupils at Liviu Rebreanu School in Cluj-Napoca. The focus-group took place in a classroom and it lasted an hour and twenty minutes. The brand used in the study were chosen from the Interbrands 2011 Ranking of the Top 100 Brands[21]. The selected brands are Coca-Cola, brand found on the 1st position of the top, Danone- 52nd position, McDonald's, 6th position, and Disney, 9th position.

The selection of the subjects was done after getting the written approval from their parents. The locations where we held the focus-groups were class rooms from "Liviu Rebreanu" School in Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

On a series of cards we printed the logos of these 4 brands and erased the names of the brands using a photo editing program. On another series of postcards we printed a product of these four companies and other similar products.

Before the focus-group started the respondents were left alone, in order to socialize for a few minutes. In the beginning of the focus-group, children were asked to say their age and something about themselves. For starters, they were asked to say what brands they use on a daily basis. Then, they were encouraged to say stories about their experiences with brands.

We showed them the logo cards and they were asked to state if they knew what company the products belong to. The next step was to show them the product cards. They had to associate the products with one of the companies (McDonald's, Danone, Disney and Coca-Cola). In the end, the children were asked to share their opinion about the brands and tell stories regarding their experiences with brands.

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20 See Mirela Mirea. *Succesul şi insuccesul şcolar*, article available at http://www.scribd.com/mirela%20mirea/d/17222451-Succesul-Si-Insuccesul-Scolar

21 See the top at- http://www.interbrand.com/en/best-global-brands/best-global-brands-2008/best-global-brands-2011.aspx

Results and conclusions

For the first game, the one with logo cards, the results are: 60% of respondents recognized the Disney logo, 90% recognized the Coca-Cola logo, 70% recognized Danone's logo and they all recognized McDonald's logo.

For the second game, results were slightly different: 50% of the respondents associated McDonald's ice cream with McDonald's company; 70% associated Danonino yoghurt with Danone company; 70% of the respondents associated Coca-Cola beverage with Coca-Cola company and 60% of them associated Mickey Mouse with Disney Company.

We analyzed children's non verbal communication in order to identify which category they are in (persuaders, edges, followers and reflexives). We found that only 7 pupils were persuaders. They were sociable, open to discussion, always took the initiative and had a high self-esteem. Therefore, we think that they attribute external causes for their seldom failure. By correlating their attribution type with desire for certain brands, we think that the level of self-esteem will determine his consumer behavior (asking brands because they think they deserve them).

From the pupils in the focus-groups, 19 were followers. These children were mostly open to discussion and seem to have a normal self-esteem level. This means they make external attributions for their success or failure. It is most probably that they ask for certain brands because they think they deserve them.

We found 4 reflexives in the focus-groups. They seem like smart kids, but they did not like to talk in public, they were somehow anti-social. By studying the behavior of these 4 kids, we got to the conclusion that they have a low self-esteem and therefore they do internal attributions for their failures. By correlating the type of attribution with the desire for certain brands, we think that it is highly improbable that they ask for certain brands. They do not think they deserve them.

One of the girls told us about her experience at McDonald's. It seems that her parents take her there every Sunday, as it is the only day when the whole family gets together for lunch. She described the day at McDonald's as a holiday. A respondent admitted that he plays about 4-5 hours a day on Play Station 2. He said he would play continuously and his parents do not try to stop him. Another girl told us about her experience at the mall. She goes there on weekends, when her mother is not working. She said that she often asks her mom for things she saw on commercials or things her classmates have. The girl admitted she starts a fight in the public, if her mother does not buy the things she wants.

Some of the children's opinions about Coca-Cola brand are: „It tastes good", „I buy Coca-Cola every day at school", „My mother thinks it's not healthy", „I like Coca-Cola commercials". About Danone company respondents said: „I like Danone yoghurt", „My mother said I should eat yoghurt because I need calcium". Children stated about Disney: „I like Disney cartoons more then any other cartoons", „I watch cartoons about three hours a day", „The Tom& Jerry cartoons are my favorite".

About McDonald's, some said: „I like going to McDonald birthday parties", „My dad hates taking me to McDonald's", „Every time I go to the mall, I also go to McDonald's". We can state that respondents have different opinions about these brands and that their opinions are affected by their parents.

The first research hypothesis (*Children recognize the logo of the brands participating in the study*) was confirmed. The respondents recognized the logo of the brands they were exposed to. The second research hypothesis (*Children are able to distinguish certain products as belonging to the companies in the study*) was not totally confirmed. A part of the subjects did not associate the products with the company so easily. This may be because they had to choose one out of three different products for every company.

The goal of this research paper was to find out children's brand perception, specifically on McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Disney and Danone brand. The respondents have easily recognized the logo of the brands they were exposed to, but had some trouble doing the same with the company products. Their opinions about the brands is influenced by their consumer behavior

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