

Consumer Socialization, Buying Decisions, and Consumer Behaviour in Children: Introduction to the Special Issue

Gunnar Mau · Hanna Schramm-Klein · Lucia Reisch

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When the English government passed the Infants Relief Act in 1874, which declared contracts concluded by children as invalid, it had one goal: to protect children “from their own lack of experience and from the wiles of pushing tradesmen and moneylenders” (James 1965). Obviously, even at that time, parliamentarians believed that children could be overtaxed by merchandising and often unable to react appropriately to the commercial interests of retailers, manufacturers, and financiers.

Nowadays, the Infants Relief Act is regarded as one of the first attempts by a federal government to protect children as unique participants in the free market (Kunkel et al. 2004). Today, more than 140 years after the act came into force, children constitute a major target group for manufacturers and retailers for three main reasons (Schor 2004; Story and French 2004): (1) On the one hand, they have a tremendous influence on their parents’ purchase decisions (Clarke and McAuley 2010), which especially affects products that are consumed by children but bought by their parents, e.g., toys or sweets. However, children also have an indirect impact on their family’s other purchases. Most notably, this goes for families that either have a large amount of money or very little (Hamilton 2009). (2) Secondly, children often have a substantial monetary budget at their disposal. For instance, the financial scope that children have at their disposal in the form of pocket money or gifts has steadily increased in recent years. Overall, the value of purchase decisions, upon which children have a considerable direct or indirect influence, was estimated at a staggering US\$ 320 billion in 2004 (Shoham et al. 2004) or 47% of American household spending in 2005 (Boland et al. 2012). (3) Finally, companies strive to attach children to their brands, starting already at a

G. Mau (✉)

Shoppermetrics GmbH & Co. KG, Fruchttallee 23a, 20259 Hamburg, Germany
e-mail: mau@shoppermetrics.com

G. Mau · H. Schramm-Klein

University of Siegen, Hoelderlinstr. 3, 57068 Siegen, Germany

H. Schramm-Klein

e-mail: hsk@marketing.uni-siegen.de

L. Reisch

Department of Intercultural Communication and Management, CBS Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility, Copenhagen Business School, Porcelaenshaven 18a, 2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark
e-mail: lr.ikl@cbs.dk

young age, with the objective to maximize the consumer's loyalty to the brand in the long run (McDougall and Chantrey 2004).

The significance of children as a key target group has resulted in manufacturers addressing a large number of marketing messages towards them (persuasive attempts, cf. Cross 2002). As a result, children are exposed to an increasing amount of advertising geared and tailored directly towards them. Especially the growing number of media used by children and the more readily, location-independent availability of media (e.g., through the internet or cell phones) is increasingly causing children to be exposed to advertising (O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson 2011). Moreover, a large number of products are specifically aimed at children as buyers, e.g., through a colourful packaging design featuring child-oriented pictures, the products' haptic or their composition (Cook 2009; Honeyman 2010; Wilson and Wood 2004). However, children do not only come into contact with marketing messages that are directly geared towards them. Advertising messages or other marketing activities that are actually aimed at adults are also perceived by children and influence their decisions. Consequently, McNeal (2007) concludes that almost any action by a child can be interpreted as consumption oriented. And Cram and Ng (1999, p. 298) draw the following conclusion: "Even before they learn to read, write, or do arithmetic children have already become consumers."

The considerable importance of children and young people as market participants is mirrored by deficits in their buying literacy, i.e., the ability to use the market offerings in accordance with one's own goals and needs. Children are not born with all the skills of an adult—many cognitive and affective abilities develop only in the first few years of life. For instance, a large number of empirical studies reveal that, in many areas, children do not have the same mental resources and processes at their disposal as adults (for an overview, see Roedder John 2008). These abilities develop in the first 16 to 20 years of a person's life due to neuro-anatomical changes and increasing life experience. In a common model, Roedder John (2008) structured consumer socialization into three phases: the perceptual stage (3 to 7 years old), the analytical stage (7 to 11 years old), and the reflective stage (11 to 16 years old). Each of these phases goes hand in hand with particular deficits in a child's development of mental processes. For example, children under the age of eight have difficulties in taking the perspective of their counterparts during communication (Flavell 1999). However, this ability is necessary to decipher their opposites' intentions and motives. Children under 8 years old, thus, find it hard to understand the persuasive nature of advertisements (Kunkel et al. 2004).

The gap between the challenges of the market and the development of consumer literacy in children has increasingly raised questions: Under which circumstances do children need the protection of the law, and what can help them acquire the skills to use the market offerings according to their own needs and objectives. The eight articles in this special issue help to answer these questions by providing insights into different aspects of the development of consumer literacy and their impact on consumer policy. The authors, topics, and methods of the articles highlight the variety of scientific approaches that consumer policy makers can utilize. The contributions, which stem from consumer behaviour, advertising research, psychology, and food science, are based on experiments, field studies, and conceptual projects. Moreover, they address a wide range of issues: From the procedure that the processing of marketing messages by children is based upon and the impact of new forms of communication such as advergames to the analysis of decision processes in the case of health-related and representative commodities. The results of the research projects that are presented in this issue thus help to improve our understanding of consumer literacy in children. Furthermore, the papers provide evidence-based advice for consumer policy from different perspectives.

Frequently, policymakers and caregivers refer to a need for an improvement of children's market knowledge as a key to bridge the gap between the challenges of the market and the

development of consumer literacy. The assumption behind this proposition is often that children can react as competent consumers if they understand the mechanisms of the market and are aware of persuasive attempts by retailers and manufacturers. Especially with a view to protecting children from undesired effects of advertising, this strategy seems to be prominent while other more restrictive strategies seem to be less suitable for protecting children (Buijzen 2009).

However, as Oliver B. Büttner, Arnd Florack, and Benjamin S. Serfas point out in the first contribution in this special issue, improving media literacy and persuasion knowledge might mainly prevent negative advertising effects on an explicit level. In contrast, advertising and marketing communication also affects children on an implicit level and thus influences children's consumption decisions after being exposed to the ad. Hence, in their article, the authors extend the media literacy framework and draw attention to implicit processes and delayed effects of advertising. This perspective gives rise to innovative and crucial implications for consumer policy: The authors conclude that the communication of advertising and purchasing (or media) literacy that is frequently discussed today is not enough to prevent negative effects of marketing communication on children. Instead, knowledge transfer should be accompanied by shaping effective self-regulation strategies. The latter (self-regulation) can be achieved by implementing activity-related and automated exercises and plans that are practised together with the children at school or by the parents. The conclusions of Büttner et al. are therefore important because their implications do not only have an impact on the effects of marketing communication. For instance, self-regulation strategies could help to improve children's own behaviour with regard to data privacy on the Internet. Here, studies reveal that while many users are aware of the dangers of releasing data too freely and decide to handle their own data more restrictively, in the concrete application situation, this knowledge and media literacy do not seem to prevent children from handling their own data too openly.

The second contribution in this issue also examines the processing of advertising by children, but from a different perspective. Tali Te'eni-Harari especially highlights the role of advertising involvement, i.e., the subjective significance of an advert for the child. The results reveal that the (short-term) effects of advertising on children aged between 4 and 15 years are linked to their advertising involvement. Evidently, a high level of advertising involvement leads to a more intensive engagement in the advertising on the part of the children, which goes hand in hand with a positively evaluated advert and a greater purchase intention. From this, Te'eni-Harari concludes that although children have the possibility of a content-related involvement with advertising, they utilize it only if the advert is deemed significant. Even if the study does not go into this explicitly, it can be supposed that individual elements of a commercial advertisement, such as comic characters, also increase the children's involvement. Nonetheless, the results reveal two important aspects for consumer policy: Evidently, parents can influence how meaningfully children rate advertising. In doing so, they have just as much of an impact as peers (other socialization agents were not studied). Yet above all, advertising involvement decreases with age—one indication that older children ascribe a different meaning to advertising than their younger counterparts do.

In the third contribution, Iris Vermeir and Dieneke Van de Sompel demonstrate that advertising is not only able to influence what is purchased, but also how children perceive themselves. The authors show that the presentation of attractive models in advertising can have a negative influence on the general self-worth of children under certain circumstances. In their study, this effect occurs with boys aged between eight and 10 while the self-worth of girls and older children is barely affected by attractive models. Consequently, the authors suspect that younger children lack the capacity or motivation to elaborate on advertising content. Instead, peripheral information (such as model attractiveness) has a greater impact. As in the first two

articles of this special issue, these results also reveal a central challenge for consumer policy: The transfer of knowledge and the explanation of effects can protect children against negative effects only when they are capable of applying this knowledge in the particular situation in a carefully thought-out manner.

In fact, cognitive concepts can also play a key role for children. This is the case, when opportunity, ability, and motivation favour the elaboration of communicative contents. This is demonstrated by the contributions of Yann Verhellen et al. and Waiguny et al. in this special issue. In their study on the impact of hybrid advertising formats (commercial, trailer, and advergimes), the Verhellen group examines the influence of persuasion knowledge on the impact of integrated marketing communication. The authors reveal that children aged between 11 and 14 with a low level of persuasion knowledge are more susceptible to potentially undesirable advertising effects. Studying the effect of advergimes, Waiguny et al. find complementary results, even if the participants were somewhat younger at 7 to 11 years old: Persuasion knowledge has an influence on the effects of advergimes, but this depends on how deeply the children plunge into the advergence. In the case of a greater presence, the children are less critical towards advergimes. The authors suspect that children who are highly engaged lack the capacity to process the advergence critically. As a result, the influence of persuasion knowledge is diminished. Moreover, both studies reveal that children find it difficult to identify a commercial background while playing advergimes. Evidently, the playful character of advergimes results in the advergence no longer being recognized as advertising. Both projects clearly indicate the importance of persuasion knowledge in minimizing the undesirable negative effects of advertising. Waiguny et al. demonstrate that persuasion knowledge can lose its impact, especially when advertising is combined with game elements, such as in the case of advergimes. Therefore, the authors also suggest further measures, such as media regulations, as well as training advertising literacy.

In the sixth article of this special issue, Effertz et al. examine another strategy to avoid the undesirable effects of marketing communication. The authors study the influence of health warnings on the impact of advertising on children and young people aged between 10 and 22. Their results show that the warning is evidently understood by children but does not have a corresponding effect on the purchase intention for all children. While health warnings reduced the purchase intention in general, this effect tends to be smaller in the case of younger children: The younger the children, the more likely they are to turn a deaf ear to the warning. At the same time, the authors show that the effect of the warning can be influenced by individual elements of advertising. For instance, companies that are under an obligation to include warnings in their advertising dampen the impact of the warning with a suitable commercial design—an aspect that needs consideration when drawing conclusions for consumer policy.

The final article by Cagri Yalkin suggests that the parental influence also depends on the product group. In focus groups and interviews with 12- to 16-year-old female adolescents, Yalkin identifies influential variables on consumer socialization with regard to the purchase and consumption of fashion. Here, it becomes evident that friendship groups can have a major influence on children's consumer skills and knowledge. The author concludes that consumer education not only needs to communicate knowledge about consumer rights, sustainable lifestyles, and media literacy, but also needs to take the symbolic aspects of consumption into account.

Altogether, the articles compiled in this special issue provide an in-depth picture of the key aspects of consumer socialization. The results and conclusions presented can help policymakers in their endeavour to create a supporting environment for children. Besides raising the awareness of parents and teachers for the developmental stages of the consumer

skills, policymakers can learn how children can be supported in their acquisition of consumer skills from these studies.

Such skills can be cognitive concepts. For instance, consumer/media/advertising literacy can enable children to act competently and avoid undesirable negative effects from the market field. However, the articles in this special issue also reveal that these concepts are primarily of importance when children have the motivation, ability, and opportunity to elaborate on their purchasing decisions. Yet this is not often the case in everyday life, where many decisions are made casually or under group pressure. Consumer policy needs to take this factor into account and consider additional measures above and beyond knowledge transfer.

The results of the studies in this special issue also provide hints for further measures. For example, they demonstrate that consumption patterns are picked up from parents. If parental example is the basis for children's consumption and purchase behaviour, it makes sense to consider parents and their behaviour in more depth in consumer-policy measures. Moreover, regulations and warnings to protect children are under discussion. Both have their limits if they can be avoided or circumvented—or, in the case of warnings, not understood by younger children. Ultimately, measures that target explicit knowledge, including the communication of self-regulation strategies, also appear to be a noteworthy path. Especially in situations where children do not make well-thought-out decisions, these implicit, automated action strategies might help children to resist undesirable, negative influences.

Summing up, research in this field is still in its infancy. Consequently, we hope that this special issue will inspire research into the different scientific disciplines and provide starting points for further insights into consumer socialization, buying decisions, and consumer behaviour in children. Such a solid evidence base is the precondition for sound consumer policy.

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