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Children's Consumer Behavior

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.69190>

Abstract

Children's consumer behavior is a field that has lately been given attention by marketing, psychology, sociology, and pedagogy. The reason is the understanding that a child is an important part that has an influence on family's shopping. At the same time, there is a concern about the abuse of natural child naivety and trustfulness. That is why the experts turned their focus on the knowledge about child's cognitive development and all manners of consumer socialization and economic socialization. It is possible to accept protective measures to ensure the safety of the child consumer only when we know how the consumer develops. The chapter is therefore focused on these essential topics, and the research demonstrates the consumer and economic socialization of the children in preoperational period of the cognitive development from the perspective of the children and their parents.

Keywords: consumer behavior, consumer socialization, economic socialization, children, marketing, advertisement, media

1. Introduction

The marketing and media communicators' interest in child consumers has been increasing recently. The idea of marketing to young consumers is not new but the ways of integrating children into the marketing place are [1]. Marketing includes not only the product, its price, and point of sale but also the promotion and package design. According to Young, most of the people do not differentiate between advertising, marketing, and promotional activity [2]. In any case, the marketing in Western countries began to focus on children mainly in the 1960s [3]. This is understandable, given the fact that children and young people are known to be an important consumer group. Marketers began to be aware of the increasing children's power of persuasion on their parents' buying behavior. Children and the youth, not being a strong and economically powerful group, are attractive for the marketers for their ability to convince

and persuade their family environment. In developed economies, this fact is certainly tied to sufficiency of money in the families, to the vast range of merchandise available on the market, as well as to children's own financial resources (pocket money, gifts, and summer jobs).

However, it was not always the case when, for instance, advertisements for child toys were designed to fit adult TV viewers, not children (e.g., in 1950s, in Ref. [4]). It does not mean that children in that era did not influence the purchase behavior of their parents, and as the author points out, it rather means that marketers were to discover the marketing value of children later. This knowledge was displayed in massive marketing pressure, using children and youth, on consumer behavior in households. Cradle-to-grave marketing is therefore highly spread because marketers are aware that the sooner the child is "caught into their nest," the sooner they start to raise their future loyal customer [5]. This strategy proved to be cheaper than the strategy of building a loyal customer in the adulthood or in the senior age. In this context, marketers often use knowledge of cognitive and social development of child [6, 7] and the communication strategies are adapted to this knowledge (more in the theoretical foundations).

Therefore, this chapter is focused on the process of the child becoming a customer (i.e., how they learn the consumer behavior). We will discuss the main sources influencing a contemporary child in their socialization behavior, economical behavior, which psychological theories is marketing communication mainly based on, and so on. Moreover, the research part is focused on findings of the main social factors influencing the consumer socialization of preschool children. Knowledge of these factors serves us not only to concentrate better on the child consumer but also to protect them against the negative effects of consumerism. Literature provides a large source of studies warning against this negative influence on children. The negative effects mainly concern the relationship between food marketing and child obesity, between online activity and passivity in lifestyles, between game violence and aggression, and finally between commercialization of childhood and bad parent-child relationships [1, 8, 9]. However, we have to stay aware of the fact that correlational relationship between observed variables does not indicate causal relationship. Let us take the example of the relationship between obesity and food marketing. It is clear that adverts for products with no nutritional value are tempting for children. Nevertheless, children obesity is not influenced purely by food marketing but also by insufficient physical activity, undesirable eating habits prevailing in the child's family, and so on [10]. Noble et al. propose "the paradox of modern parenting," by which they mean that parents know what is good for their child but provide them with less healthy options [11].

A large part of the debate on marketing to children has focused on advertising which is propagated mainly by TV and online. Marketers find themselves in dichotomy in order to increase the focus on child consumer and to serve as an educator and adviser. Commercial organizations are integrated in programs focused on consumer literacy [12], they bear moral messages in social marketing, and so on.

Another reason why it is necessary to look at the child consumer is the fact that while the marketing develops, the consumer develops as well. Communication channels that were valid in the past are becoming outdated and no longer address consumers. Society-wide development

contributed greatly to this situation. The development includes globalization, open market, 24/7 online service, growth of social sites, new communication technologies that enable personalized marketing approach, and many more.

It is not possible to look at the child consumer through the lenses of adult consumer behavior, as the child has specific needs, requirements, values, and attitudes. Similarly, the characterization of consumer behavior of children and young people should reflect the present day, meaning the time where these individuals grow up and by which they are formed. It is known that each generation has its own unique collection of values and that they are shaped by cultural and political environment where they grow up and which is then reflected in their values, attitudes, and opinions. In this context, we talk about the generation's approach to the consumer behavior. The current generation of kids and youths has access to better health care, better education, higher quantity of toys, and better toys [13] and also to wide variety of professions, unlimited access of information, and fast connection to the whole world. This is the Generation Z (people born after 1993) also as called the Global Generation. This generation is consisted of so-called digital natives [14] that cannot live without new technologies. They are also often described as Gen Google as they use this site to look for any information and do not think about context and links between the facts and events. On the other hand, it is a generation that uses these modern technologies for their personal growth and education [15].

Brands are an integral part of contemporary childhood, especially in the case of Generation Z [16]. Thus, it is not surprising that the advertising budget of fast food and drink products aimed for children has increased in the past few years [17]. Studies show that a child is able to recognize the brands at a very early age (18 months–3 years) and later attribute a meaning to them [18, 19]. Orientation in brands increases more considerably when the child becomes a part of the social environment filled with their peers (e.g., in kindergarten). The influence of the peers is very strong and can be explained in the context of consumer culture theory. The pressure of the social group has an impact on how the child perceives what is cool and refuses the products that are labeled as “minging” by the group. Members of the Generation Z (especially young teenagers) are idealistic, ecologically and socially sensitive [2], what we can observe on various portals and social sites. They are not afraid to “fight” the political structures and those with power when they witness injustice done to someone else or to the environment.

One of the first social links is family. Thus, in consumer socialization process, it is important to observe the child-parent relationship. Parent-child relationships are less confrontational and more collaborative these days. Advertising reacts to that and puts the parent in a position of an adviser (e.g., when choosing a bank to open an account). Moreover, in some countries, we witness a decrease of commercials focused on products linked to obesity and unhealthy lifestyle (e.g., fast food, snacks, products high in sugar, breakfast cereals) and an increase of commercials promoting alternative products: fruit juice, water, fresh fruit, and vegetables [3]. However, the aforementioned decrease could be related to the restrictive measures in these countries. For instance, in the United Kingdom, there was no advertising of products high in fat, sugar, or salt on children's TV channels [3, 13, 20]. Where such restrictions are not in order, we do not observe a step forward in the process of promoting healthy lifestyle but quite the opposite [21]. Based on what we have mentioned so far, we formulated the following

research question: what are the main social factors of the consumer socialization of children in the preoperational period of development?

2. Theoretical foundations

2.1. Children, consumption, and consumerism

Consumer socialization is a part of the overall socialization that takes place in the development of the individual. Socialization is an expression of the gradual integration of the individual into the society by acquiring social norms and rules. Consumer socialization is a gradual learning of the rules, norms, and habits in consumer and purchase process. The result is a construction of consumer behavior patterns. According to Ward [22, p. 2], the consumer socialization is “the process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace.” While in overall socialization we talk about a person being a member of the society as the result of the process, consumer socialization results in the individual being a member of the purchase and consumer processes, thus a part of the marketing. Consumer socialization is important for understanding how the culturally induced social norms are perceived by the consumer and how the consumer adapts and transforms them into the consumer behavior.

According to numerous statistics, marketing focused on children is very financially lucrative. Income from the products designed for children and youth ranges in billions of dollars in the USA and pounds in the UK [8, 13]. Here, we also must take into notice the income from the products not directly issued for children (e.g., clothing, drinks, toys, fast food, sweets, magazines, movies, music and computer software, breakfast cereals, family cars, computers, house, holidays) but in the purchase of which they have an important say [23–27]. That is the reason why many studies over the years paid attention to the consumer socialization of children and adolescents [28–30]. Socialization is a life-long process touching equally the children and their parents [31]. The process of socialization demonstrated by the acquisition of new social roles and statuses that takes place in the development of the children is equally present in the adulthood. Even though we often find generalizing information in literature that should be true for every child, we should know that each child is unique [32] and that this fact is demonstrated in the consumer socialization.

Economic socialization is a part of the consumer socialization. It is important to notice the children’s knowledge, understanding, and behavior in the economic world. Economic socialization is a process which goes through stages as the child grows up and is not created only in the specific educational environments. In literature, the term “naive economics” is used, denoting the economics non-specialists [33]. Still, it is important to know that whether we want it or not, children are pulled into the macroeconomic world from the very early age. As they are a part of the family where they grow up, they share its social-economic problems such as unemployment, low income, inflation, economic crisis of the country, and so on. Furthermore, the family teaches them the value of money, how the bank account works, what the credit and debit cards are for, and so on. As was already mentioned above, a child from

economically advanced country plays an active part in the economic world because they have their own money they can spend. Whether the money come as a gift from the relatives, from holiday or part-time jobs, or in the form of pocket money is not important.

Economic socialization includes processes by which the individuals develop their competence in dealing with the economic world [34]. The author highlights that this competence is gained through their experience of using money to purchase items, as well as through persuading others to buy or exchange a product, so the child learns to better understand the importance of the budget. Therefore, economic socialization represents not only knowledge, but also behavior, opinions, and attitudes that are necessary for the world of economy [34]. Numerous evidence points to the fact that if a child learns to work with money (e.g., by having their own pocket money they can use according to their needs), they learn to understand the value of money [34, 35]. If they desire something they have to save up money for, they learn to put money aside for future purchases and not spend it immediately. Furthermore, a child owning a (fictional) credit card spends more money than if they have (fictional) money [35].

Evidence confirms the predictions that financial education depends on the social class, age, social-cultural background, and gender. The middle-class children are more familiar with banking vocabulary and professional prestige in comparison with children from the working class [34]. Girls are more active in shopping and activities linked to consumption than boys [36]. It is therefore in place to stress the importance of the economic education in the family environment, as well as in the school. This is what is missing in the Slovak educational system, although the public would welcome economics as a school subject.

A number of studies documenting children's economic socialization focused on how children understand the economic world of adults [34, 37, 38]. Moreover, we can find studies that were focused more on the explanation of the children's economic behavior through observing how children solve economic problems [39, 40]. However, P. Webley warns that little is known about bargaining, bartering, and swapping, which are present with children and are in direct connection to the economic socialization [41]. It is widely known that children exchange football cards, games, books, toys (e.g., from *Kinder Surprise*, *McDonald's Happy Meal*), or toy cars, sweets, and stamps and this custom perpetuates collecting, as well. Swapping is a typical activity of middle childhood but it can be seen in preschool age, too. There are three reasons explaining this behavior, according to Webley: (1) swapping is enjoyable; (2) friendship support; and (3) economic justification (it is better, cheaper, and so on) [41].

2.2. Theories and consumer development

In this section, we present the main theoretical concepts forming the basis of marketing communication focused on child consumer. Although theories such as Piaget's theory of cognitive development [6], behaviorist learning theory, theory of social learning [7], or cultural and historical approach according to Vygotsky [42] did not explain consumer development, their theories have found their place in the marketing theory.

Purchase and consumer processes are dependent on the level of mental and physical development. Thus, to understand consumer socialization of children and young people, it is

important to consider psychological developmental theories. These theories enable the understanding of development of children's abilities as consumers.

The cognitive-developmental approach of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget is often applied to economic thinking of children [6]. Piaget explains the development of cognitive functions as the process of adapting to the outside world [6]. This process of adaptation is composed of two processes: accommodation (adaptation of the organism to the environment) and assimilation (organism adapts the environment to fit its needs). The author studied children's understanding of physical world through children's experiments via direct interaction with the environment. According to Piaget, there is a transactional process during the development, in other words, equilibration which links children's cognitive stages to their experience of the world [6]. This process produces a balance between the cognitive level of child at a specific moment of the child stage and their experience of the environment.

When we look at the development of the consumer and economical socialization through Piaget's theory, it is clear that the child embraces information and organizes it into particular contexts dependent of the level of child's cognitive development. We can say that the consumer behavior begins at birth and the consumer behavior patterns develop in stages. Piaget's theory denotes the following four stages of cognitive development:

1. *the sensor-motor period of development* lasts from birth to age 2. Children in this stage of development do not have symbolic representations yet but so-called schemas or mental structures that are based on children's actions. However, near the end of this stage, children start to develop a general symbolic function, which means that they know that a doll represents a person, for instance [34]. Children explore the world around them, thanks to grabbing and looking, and they become egocentric individuals [2];
2. *the preoperational period* (age 2–7) is typical of formation of the concept of the world surrounding the child, based on what the child likes. They look at the world from their point of view. Young points out that this stage is dominated by appearance [2]. Additionally, symbolic thinking and language develop [34]. Similar to the first stage, the child in this stage is egocentric and convinced that everyone has the same view of the world as they do. They are also convinced that everything is possible, even acting against the laws of nature. They perceive TV commercials as funny, entertaining, and trustworthy and demand the advertised products [5, 43];
3. A child in *the concrete operational period* (age 7–11) understands that other people may have different views on things. Thinking is in a concrete and demonstrative position. The child starts to apply negotiation and persuasion in social interaction with others. Children are critical and distrustful of advertisements [5]. New forms of advertising such as product placement, or suggestions from bloggers and vloggers, are however not perceived as advertisements by the children in this stage, so it can have control over them;
4. The last stage of cognitive development, *the formal operational period* (age 11 and older), is characteristic by the child being able to think systematically and to work with abstract terms. In other words, they are capable of all forms of abstract thinking. Even though residual

egocentric thinking is still present, allocentric behavior (i.e., behavior centered on others) starts to develop [2]. A child in this stage can already understand the persuasive content of advertisement. They tend to have a critical and even rejecting attitude toward traditional forms of advertisements (especially TV, billboards, and so on). However, new forms of advertising, like product placement in video games and recommendations from influential people (e.g., bloggers, vloggers, sportsmen, singers), have more power to engage children's attention. These means of advertising are used not only by commercial marketing but also by social marketing.

According to J. Piaget, all children pass through four stages of cognitive development in the same order but at different speeds [6]. Thus, the cognitive development approach to children stresses intraindividual difference as the child grows up [34], although it is criticized for not taking the individual variability into consideration. It is important to remember that individual variability is conditioned by the structure of the personality and also by the social and cultural environment where the child grows up.

The cognitive development approach can also be found in the context of the brand perception. A study from New Zealand showed that while 7- and 8-year-olds perceive the product itself (i.e., its perceptual features), and 10- and 11-year-olds orient themselves more on the brands (i.e., perception in symbolic level is in process) [44]. It is evident that the development of brand perception is closely related to the cognitive development. Therefore, we can easily understand how the brand perception develops in child from feature-based appreciation of logos and product features to the understanding of the brand symbols that are linked to certain social stereotypes.

Economic thinking, meaning the understanding of the world of economy, requires the logical structure of the mind that is dependent on the economic knowledge. Economic thinking develops in accordance with the development of the cognitive processes. Economic information that the child acquires during the development is organized into relationships by the child. Economic thinking is the basis of economic knowledge. To understand the world of economy, the child needs to reach the abstract level of cognitive processes. During the development of the children's economic socialization, the following information sources are essential: (1) active information (purchasing or choosing a school orientation); (2) entertaining information (advertising, news, films, TV series); and (3) social information (peers, friends) [45].

Behaviorist learning theory on the other hand stresses the effects of the environment on children's behavior [7], and the given model describes interindividual variations in children of the same age [34]. This theory explains the behavior of the individual. The child gains experience and skills through positive reinforcement of their behavior by being rewarded and through avoiding punishment (related to negative emotion) for their behavior. A functional behavior of children is imitated because it is reinforced.

Other authors add to the cognitive approach the impact of the social environment on the development of the individual, which also manifests in the acquisition of the consumer behavior. Some of the authors are [38] who argue that children are active agents in the process of learning the economic behavior. Moreover, economic socialization is the process by which

the child assimilates knowledge about the consumption practices and economic world. The understanding of the economic notions depends on the cognitive apparatus of the children, as well as on their methods of interpretation of the marketplace.

Another important theory explaining how the child learns to recognize the world and to integrate it into their experience and behavior is the theory of social learning [7]. Author describes the process on the basis of two key phenomena: observation and imitation. Children adopt new behaviors through imitating or modeling. They learn the consumer behavior through these processes, which is called observation learning. Children imitate the consumer behavior of the most relevant models: parents, siblings, peers, and idols from media. Children attempt to reproduce what they observe in their environment [46]. Learning through observation is a form of cognitive learning [47]. Social learning theory is therefore grounded in the knowledge of behavioristic learning theory which works with the notions of reinforcement and punishment. So, the children are active in the learning and the reinforcement of their new habits, new patterns of behavior. We witness a reciprocal determinism, which is when the environment affects the child and the behavior of the child affects the environment [7].

The social role theory [48] explains different position of the genders in dependence of the historical division of labor between women and men. From this viewpoint, the social roles that the individual holds during the socialization process in the life play an important role in the learning of the consumer behavior, as well. Thus, the child becomes a consumer by fulfilling their social roles (e.g., pupil, daughter, son, sibling, granddaughter, and grandson). The main sources of information in this educational process are believed to be parents, family habits, peers, advertising, and the products.

Yet another approach explaining how children become active members of the consumption is a view of participation of the children in sociocultural activities, especially of how they take part in the consumption activities. The emphasis is put on social and cultural environment that forms the individual in every regard with consumerism included [49]. Social and cultural environment denotes the environment in family, school, or religion, which forms the personality of the child, primarily their language and cultural meanings. The child becomes a part of the society where they gain skills from participation in everyday social life for the individual does not develop on their own, rather than in interaction with other people and environment.

In this context, L.S. Vygotsky's cultural and historical approach laid the basis of the study of the individual. He puts stress on the features, language, and culture playing key roles in the forming of awareness and thinking [42]. L.S. Vygotsky explains the developmental processes as the result of social interaction, history, and culture of the particular environment where the child grows up, while also considering the influence of the natural (i.e., evolutionary and biological) environment [42]. Through day-to-day activities, the child assimilates a conventional language to consumption and acquires a set of social standards relating to consumption [50]. The authors argue that it mainly means an understanding of the concepts of brand, price, quality, comparisons of products, mastered references, a search for identity, and membership within a group. Furthermore, the child in social and cultural environment learns consumption practices via interaction with other members of the society (relatives, peers, teachers, and

so on). The child compares their experience with others and not only in face-to-face relationships but also through institutional systems (i.e., distribution and retailing, carnivals, festivals, sales techniques, and so on) [51].

In marketing, we can see cultural differences of consumers in packaging, advertising, or taste, which as a result have an impact on different consumer experiences of children growing up in different social and cultural environments. Therefore, the child learns the consumer behavior through different kinds of guidance (parents, peers) and also through different forms of semi-otic tools (language, advertising, packaging, and so on) [51]. The child is not only a passive recipient of tidings related to consumer behavior but also an active individual learning and developing persuasion skills, language, and other social skills.

The answer to a question as to when does the consumer socialization begin must be from the birth. The child acquires the first consumer experience in the family through clothing, food, toys, TV, or shopping with parents. In some sense, the child is a part of the social behavior in family even before the birth. Future parents prepare for their role very responsibly. They take care to pick product and services for the future mother (workouts, DVDs, clothes, food supplements, and so on) and for the offspring (clothes, furniture in the baby's room, and so on). The parents can also choose to buy new, more spacious dwelling, or bigger and safer cars. Moreover, the child gains consumer experience not only from siblings (e.g., by playing the Internet games, seeing Internet advertising) but also from peers and relatives or family friends. Consumers often use the same brands as their parents used [52], where we can see a connection between the consumer model of the parents and their children. This fact is used by marketing communication in the so-called upbringing and care of the loyal customer. Here we can see the use of elements of nostalgia, that is, the return to the past, in commercials and packaging.

Evidence shows that similar to the influence of parents on the consumer behavior of their kids, the children have an impact on their parents, as well. Children influence the consumption of products for the family [53–55]. Their impact is notable in areas tied to new trends, technologies, products, and brands, because they have better orientation in these areas (also thanks to the peers and the Internet) than their parents do. Thanks to new technologies, the kids acquire technological skills faster and more efficiently, so their technological competence is higher than the competence of their parents. The children's influence on the purchase behavior of the parents can also be seen in the case when the parent buys the brands of daily-life products that they know their child prefers. This applies to other generations as well, as children are not only in contact with their parents and siblings but also with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. All of these groups influence each other's consumer behavior. The parents, close relatives, and mass media (primarily television) have the greatest impact on consumer socialization of the child [56], in contrast to adolescence, where other institutions move ahead, especially school, peers, social sites, bloggers, and vloggers.

To understand the consumer socialization processes, it is important to know how the consumer learning takes place. The society is diverse and the family is diverse too. These days, we do not have one family model traditionally based on blood or legal relations. In the current postmodern society, we meet different sorts of families. The traditional uniform model is no more. The family is now a kind of a "social network, that includes members from the formal

and/or informal family" [57, p. 55]. Additionally, the cross-generational co-living that was common in the past is now rarely encountered, especially in the socially and economically developed countries. This is reflected in the interaction of the family members. Family discussions and meals that can be tied to negotiations about consumption are sometimes replaced by the communication by phones, mails, or text messages. This phenomenon is translated into consumer socialization which is changing by the influence of the postmodern family co-living. Therefore, if we wish to discern the primary consumer socialization of the children that is realized in the family, we must take the family activities in the notice, specifically the family rituals related to consumption practices, consumption of media, and shopping practices. To be able of a proper focus on the children and young people, we must also know how they perceive marketing practices, in other words, how they consume the advertising and promotions.

The fundamental theoretical framework to our question of "What main social factors play a role in the consumer socialization of children in the preoperational period of development?" was the cognitive theory of Piaget [6], as well as the theory social learning [7]. The emphasis is put on the knowledge of the development of cognitive apparatus, on which the perception of media and the marketing message is dependent. Apart from the cognitive development of the individual, equally important is to consider the socialization process of the child which is underway through the observation and imitation. The child acquires consumption practices in interaction with other members of the environment. That is the reason why our research was also grounded in Vygotsky's cultural and historical approach [42]. To find the answer to our question, qualitative research design proved to be the most appropriate. Therefore, we chose the method of semi-structured interview conducted with children alone and their parents alone.

3. Research

The aim of the research was to find out the main socialization factors of the children's consumer socialization in the preoperational period of development (from 2- to 7-year-old) as well as how these factors are reflected in the consumer behavior. The reason is that consumer socialization is an important part of the child's consumer behavior. We wanted to discover how the children in that age understand the advertising; what influences them to choose the products; what is their level of economical socialization; what influencing strategies they use on parents in order to get certain product/brands; what are the family activities, daily rituals, shopping rituals, and so on. The consumer socialization was looked at from the child's and their parents' perspective.

Qualitative research design was used for the data collection. Research sample consisted of 45 children (26 girls, 19 boys) and their parents ($N = 45$) living in Slovakia.

The semi-structured interview was used with every participant as the research method [58, 59]. To achieve the objective of the research, a semi-structured interview with a child and a semi-structured interview with a parent were conducted. Interviews were individual, recorded on a voice recorder, and then transcribed into a text form. The length was approximately 30

for children and 20 min for parents. To determine the target areas, we used an exploratory research method with emphasis on capturing the range of relevant topics concerning the researched issue in view. In the research, we used the concept of thematic analysis as an analytical tool, created by Braun and Clarke [60]. They argue that thematic methods identify and analyze the data to find information or meaning related to the themes or patterns that correlate with research questions. Thematic analysis is based on coding and consists of six phases [60]. In phase 1, the data corpus was transcribed into written form. In phase 2, "initial codes" were generated, meaning that the themes were located and their relation to the research question was described. In phase 3, the meaning of the themes was explained [60, p. 20]. In phase 4, the themes were visualized in the candidate "thematic map." The research themes and thematic map (**Figure 1**) were established within a rough frame of asked questions and based on answers from the data corpus. In phase 5, "the "essence" of what each theme is about was identified [60, p. 20]. In phase 6, the report on the base of "final comprehensive analysis" was produced [60, p. 21]. We tried to provide "sufficient evidence of the themes within the data— i.e., enough data extracts to demonstrate the prevalence of the theme" (ibidem).

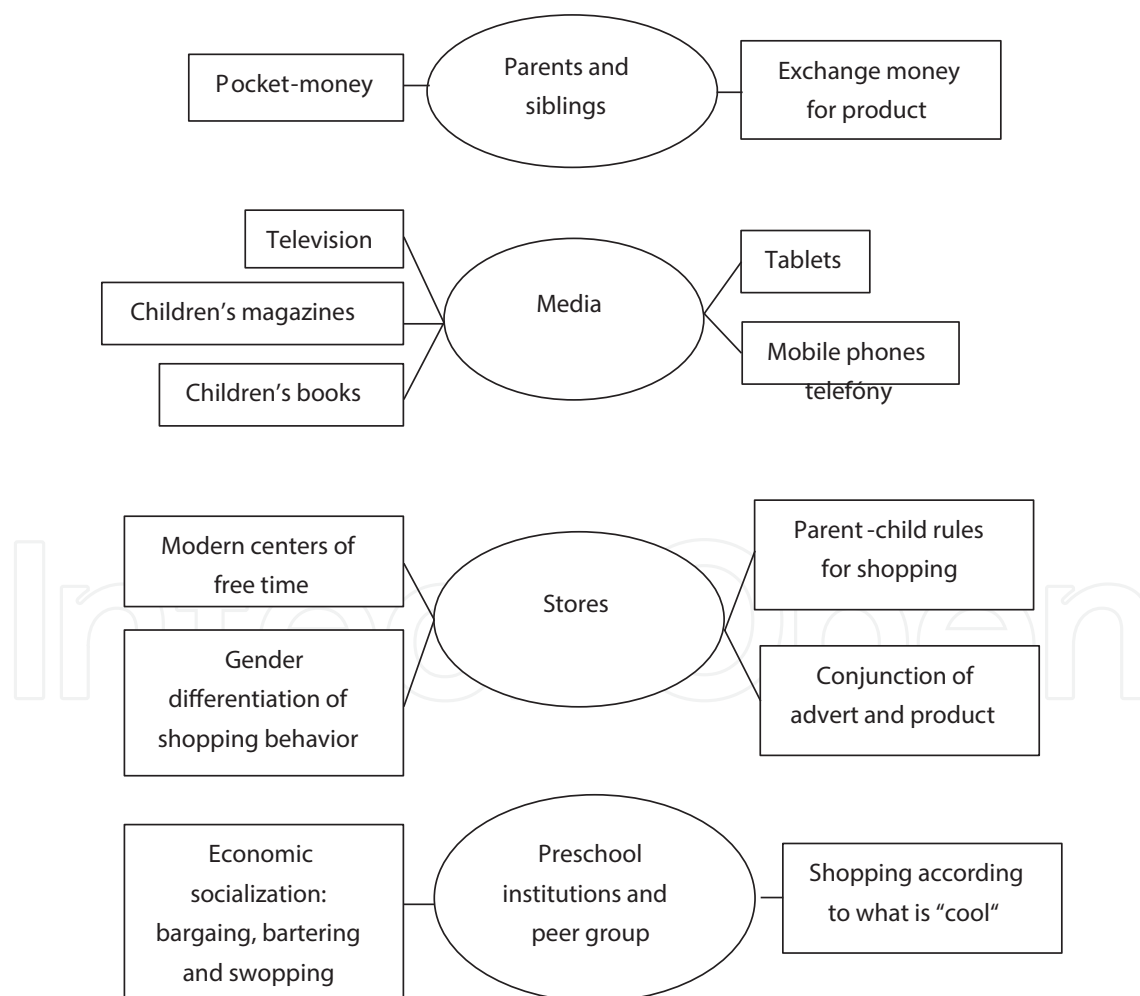


Figure 1. The thematic map of the main socialization factors of the children's consumer socialization in the preoperational period of development with four main themes and subthemes.

3.1. Socialization agents of preoperational period of development

The analyzed interviews with the children and their parents have revealed four key factors. According to the terminology of Braun and Clarke “main overarching themes” [60, p. 20]. These are themes that influence the consumer behavior of the children in the preoperational period of cognitive development: (1) parents and siblings; (2) media; (3) stores; and (4) pre-school institutions and peer group.

(1) Parents and siblings

Parents proved to be one of the main socialization agents of the children. This fact is in correspondence with the knowledge found in literature, and we find that parents and family are important economic socialization agents [61, 62]. They explain the basic terms of the consumer world to the kids, like what is money, what it can be used for, how do they get to it, what is the advertisement for, and so on. The children learn to understand the value of money; furthermore, they learn symbols, although it still remains in the abstraction level and they struggle to conciliate with the fact that they cannot have something they like and want (e.g., for the lack of money or correspondence to unhealthy lifestyle). This can be demonstrated by the statement of a 5-year-old boy: *“When I grow up, I will make a lot of money and will buy all the ice-cream from the store, even in the winter!”*

One of the important factors contributing to the economic education is the pocket money and allowances which have an educative role [63, 64]. Although this practice is recommended more in the adolescence [63], or from the age of 6 [63], the foundations are laid even before reaching this age. In our sample, we encountered a beginning of thinking about saving up for the desired product, which demonstrates the following statement: *“I have a lot of money in my piggy bank (from grandma, dad, and mom), and when I’ll have enough, I’ll buy the Butterfly Barbie”* (girl, age 7).

Some of the parents stated that they try to give earning opportunities for doing household chores but mainly to the older siblings of the children from the studied sample.

The older siblings pulled the children in the preoperational period to the commercial world more (e.g., by using video games, tablet, watching videos from popular vloggers), compared to the only children or those with younger siblings.

(2) Media

Media represent another very important part of the consumer socialization. Through the media, the child acquires models and norms, and the idea about how the world works, which is allowed and applauded not only in the society but also sanctioned on the other hand [5].

The young consumer is affected by the medial messages not only from the TV but also from billboards, posters, and websites. Media are extremely attractive to children even from the first moments of their lives [18]. Electronic media emit sounds, and images are colorful and moving; therefore, they naturally attract the attention of the children.

The children from our study are in contact with mass media that are usually represented by television and child magazines. That is reflected in the time distribution in the family. TV is

most often turned on in the morning before the departure for kindergarten, in the afternoon after returning home, and during the weekend mornings when the children-oriented programs air.

The content of magazines and children's books is consumed in the presence of the parents or older siblings, usually in the afternoon or the evening. *"What I like the most is to draw in and read "Macko Pusík" (Eng. Pusík the Bear, children magazine; author's note) with my brother" (girl, age of 6). Commercial have high viewership. "We have to pay attention to the commercial breaks. Then we switch programs, because those commercial that are in the TV don't have a good impact on kids. They are loud, belligerent, and misleading" (mother of 3- and 4-year-olds).*

Parents often delimited children's commercials watching, and they admitted however that TV, tablet, or games on the mobile phone are used to entertain the children while the parents work or want to have a rest. This is a risk factor, as children spending more time in front of the television or computer tend to be more materialistic and have lower self-esteem [65].

The children viewed the advertisement as funny and entertaining, which corresponds to the statement of a 4-year-old boy: *"It's funny when they chase each other in the commercial, and make funny fools of themselves."*

(3) Stores

The third theme emerging from the interviews was stores. There, the child meets with the media messages from clothing, magazines, packaging, or store shelves. All parents declared that shopping malls are big traps where the supply and advertising make the bargaining (related to the consumerism) with children harder. The parents stated that the children accompany them in most of the daily purchases of the basic products. The girls were more active and demanded more the products they had already seen in the commercial or a nice packaging in the shop captured their attention. This finding corresponds to Watiez's [36] findings, when the girls took a more active part in the activities related to the consumption, compared to the boys. Some parents stated to have arrangements with their children where they agree to buy one product the child wants (usually sweets) and nothing more. However, the parents also admitted that sometimes they are unable to refuse additional demands of their children and eventually buy what they want. Another group of parents that does not have rules about shopping admitted to often deal with conflicts with the children in the shop, because the child demands certain product and the parents are unwilling to buy it. In situations like these, the children prefer to pick the product they like and that they previously saw in the commercial or that is being promoted in the store by other people. *"I like when I can taste some cookie that the ladies in the shop offer, and then mommy buys it for me" (girl, age of 5).*

TV commercials are trusted by the children, and they tend to long for the merchandise that is promoted in those commercials [5].

The interviews with the parents furthermore demonstrated that most of the family shopping is done during the weekend. Parents tend to pick a shopping center with indoor children playground with supervision. *"My son really likes the children playground, so me and my husband can do the shopping in peace, not being distracted. We even see it as a form of relax" (mother of a 4-year-old).* The shopping centers of this century became the modern centers of free time.

They offer all kinds of activities like different sports or cultural programs. However, spending free time in the shopping centers takes away the time that could be spent in the nature, which was acknowledged by the parents of our child participants, as well.

(4) Preschool institutions and peer groups

Upon commencement of the preschool, the child arrives to wider contact with the peers. The peer group is therefore another socialization institution which influences the wills, desires, attitudes, and values of the child [5]. The child's viewpoint of the world is still egocentric in this stage of development [2] and the game with their peers frequently ends up in quarrel over toys [66]. *"When Peter doesn't want to give me the digger, I take it from him"* (boy, age of 5).

The peer pressure to own a certain product or brand was declared by the parents in our study, as well. The child wants to be a part of the social group in the kindergarten, so they put pressure on the parent to buy what they think is cool. *"We gave into pressure from our son who wanted us to buy the exact same model of a car that his friend owns, although he already had a similar one at home"* (father of a 5-year-old son).

Even though in this age of development the perception is not yet in the symbolic level [44], our study sample showed that children under the peer pressure have knowledge of the products that are regarded as cool. The children were included in the bargaining, bartering, and swapping, what could be considered as the first signs of economic socialization [39]. The economic socialization occurred mainly in the process of swapping of football cards, collectible stickers, and sweets.

4. Conclusion

Child consumer of the present day is more than ever surrounded by medial messages that influence their values, attitudes, experience, and also behavior in the consumer-oriented society. For this young generation, television advertising represents only one aspect of their consumption experience, and other media, especially the Internet, have a lot more power [8, 67]. Apart from the TV, the child consumer is influenced by medial messages from billboards, posters, websites, clothing, text messages, magazines, packaging, radios, store shelves, video games, commercials on different types of media, or banners on websites. We also have to be aware that products reach the child in the school (e.g., on bags, notebooks, pen cases) or the playgrounds where logos of the companies investing in the building or renovation of the playground as a part of the socially responsible marketing are to be found. Therefore, in the interest of the protection of the children and young people, it is essential to know the main socialization agents that play an important role in consumer and economic socialization. These factors—main themes—were parents and siblings; media; stores; and preschool institutions and peers for the group of children aged from 2 to 7. Another study also support our findings that the biggest impact on consumer socialization in the children lives have been the parents, close relatives, and mass media [56]. Apart from these socialization institutions (i.e., media, parents, siblings, school, peers), our research exposed stores as another important socialization factor. They are places that along shopping provide fun and relaxation. Moreover,

we find there the realization of different marketing communication tools, as well as of personal sale, advertising, sale support, and PR. This is the environment where children connect the product they saw in advert with that seen directly in the store and demand the purchase of said product.

A paradox from the part of the parents is evident, which we already encountered in the past, where the parents on the one hand criticize the negative influence of media on the healthy development of their child and on the other hand they prefer the use of said media in family leisure activities [43]. Additionally, they buy unhealthy products for their children, even though they are aware of the fact that those products bear no nutritional value and can be damaging to children [11]. As our research showed, the media considerably structure daily rhythm of the family and are part of their rituals. On one hand, parents want to protect their children from the media, and on the other, they use the media as a way of distracting and entertaining children. Preschool children are consumers of not only mass media (e.g., TV, children books and magazines) but also of personal media designated for older people (PC, tablet, mobile phone).

The parents are critical to the lack of the media education that is present only in some Slovak schools as an elective subject, so there is no systematic nature. The parents however can contribute to the development of the economic socialization through explaining and guiding children to work with their "own income" coming from gifts and as a reward for doing household chores [45]. Children in preschool age already understand that they can exchange money for the product and also that if they save money for the desired product, they can buy it. This is in accordance with their cognitive development [6]. However, it is surprising that in preschool age, we can already witness the first signs of economic socialization, namely bargaining, bartering, and swapping. Similarly, the pressure to buy products that are seen as "cool" by the peers is evident in our research sample.

The time of preoperational period is when the symbolic thinking and language develop [34], giving the opportunity to actively intervene and thus form the consumer behavior in children in a way of raising a future responsible consumer who is not only consumption oriented. This task is on parents, preschool institutions, media, and, as our research demonstrated, on stores, as well.

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