Abstract

Marketing communications focused on the children’s consumer sometimes include expressive elements of aggression that are explicitly shown in the advertising media texts carried out by communication media in advertising communication processes. Children are very sensitive and they make their vision of how the world works on the basis of what they see and hear. Defamation and aggressive marketing communication are highly harmful to their development. This is due to the fact that they still fail to distinguish between fiction and reality. Consequently, the gender (verbal and visual) stereotypes presented in advertising, as well as in videogames, journalism or film production, may even lead to the idea that violent relationships between the two genders are standard and that women are passive victims unconditionally accepting the dominance and violence from men’s side. This article answers the following questions: 1) what is the role of stereotypes in media contents and processes of aggressive marketing, 2) how to apply stereotypes in aggressive marketing influence on the development of consumer competencies of children with respect to their cognitive and moral abilities.

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Keywords: aggressive marketing; advertising; children; marketing communication; gender stereotypes; media

1. Introduction

In order to increase consumerism, consumers are exposed to sophisticated persuasive approaches that influence their attitudes and purchase behaviours. Higher income of consumers is reflected to higher purchase power which then results to the growth of consumption, lower savings and increased indebtedness. We are witnessing that shopping centres, thanks to consumerism, are becoming the architects and at the same time cathedrals of...
contemporary culture (Šramová, 2012). These processes are founded on advertising messages, continuously stressing the fact that if an individual purchases the advertised product, s/he will be happier, more successful, more popular and will avoid anxiety resulting from the failure to fulfil his/her social needs (Moschis & Churchill, 1979; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003).

If the media convey the given information and simultaneously provide – apart from families, schools and peer groups – also an important socializing function, then the media teach children the standards and values, according to which they adopt and shape attitudes towards the objects of social reality. Advertising is even considered as one of the most influential socializing institutions in modern society (Jhally, 1987). Research claim that a child until the age of ten or eleven is not able to differentiate whether presented news reflects social or media reality (Helus, 2004; Šramová, 2012). Children shape their image of the world, design their mental picture and learn how the world works also through the life shown in commercials. Through the media, children learn the consumer behaviour, i.e. the skills and knowledge regarding the consumer behaviour and shape their attitude towards consumerism.

According to J. Piaget’s (1999) cognitive theory, this process is connected with human cognitive development. The way how people code and decode news, information and media messages depends on the individual’s cognitive schemes and structures. The reflection of the social world thus proceeds through assimilation (i.e. the process of incorporating a new object or event into the child’s existing mental scheme) and accommodation (i.e. the process where the existing scheme is unable to incorporate new knowledge and the scheme needs to be changed). The author states that this process forms from the sensomotor stage (aged 0-2 years) to the formal operational stage (from 11th/12th year of age). The reflection of the social world thus leads from egoism to decentralization, to moral reciprocity and to the ability to understand the views and opinions of others.

From the marketing point of view, this is a highly sensory stimulating process, where children and adolescents are, as consumers of advertising, pulled into the media world and thus they uncritically adopt advertising messages. They are fascinated by media celebrities and their lifestyle, try to identify with them and strive for uniformity that would ensure social acceptance by their peers. In this process, however, consumers trying to achieve individualism demonstrated by the denial of advertising and advertising contents, reach the critical reflexion of the social world.

The social constructivism and communication pragmatic approach to reality (Pavelka, 1992; Burr, 2004) explains that the media, through media contents, deliver not only a passive reflection or expression of social reality but they also actively co-create and design the social reality and culture. The standardization and stereotyping of media contents belong to the most used, most effective and at the same time, the most problematic tools of mass and advertising communication.

“Human communicative behaviour generates cultural products – and in the course of genesis and development of the human races – the completely social and cultural reality. On the other hand, human communicative behaviour is dependent on this reality because it works as an ambience where all this human communicative behaviour takes place and it is at the same time a set of standards that help construct and interpret these social and cultural products“ (Pavelka, 2008, p. 23).

Stereotyping in the media sphere helps audiences understand the presented messages faster and more easily. It aims to show the social reality in accordance with how the majority of recipients perceive it and thus contribute to their stability and confidence. Stereotypes represent an important element in the social construction of reality. They help people in orientation, evaluation, conceptualization and categorization of the world. „Stereotypes occur as a part of discourse. [...] So stereotypes will be employed as a device for maintaining an ideological position in an argument rather than a result of some cognitive process of categorization“ (Hinton, 2000, p. 25).

On the other hand, stereotyping or stereotyped images in advertising often lead to distortion, simplification and depreciation of real social and cultural problems. With respect to the stereotyping of their contents, advertising shows a strong tendency to distort and simplify the image of individual groups and communities – generalized ideas and opinions relating to groups are usually shaped based on insignificant attributes. Advertising contents shape the expectations for certain forms of behaviours pertaining to a person who belongs to a specific stereotyped group. These expectations, however, do not necessarily have to reflect the reality and may prevent its correct perception. It is why the media are subject to research and critical reflections.

2. Stereotyping in Mass and Advertising Communication and Influence of Communication Stereotypes on Child Consumer

We often witness that the media negatively depict the stereotypes regarding a certain group of people which
should show the image of a typical member of the presented group. This is most apparent when shaping and depicting gender stereotypes. The gender, by its nature, involves the social and cultural differences between women and men that are conditioned and designed by the society. What the media fail to reflect is the cultural-social development influencing the gender roles. The shift in holding social positions, in social relationships, in the division of labour between men and women, is rarely presented in the media.

Since children are regular and frequent consumers of advertising, they perceive, accept and reflect the presented stereotypes, but they also imitate and adopt them. Children often uncritically reflect the media content as actual reality which is also increased by the frequency of repeated influence of media stereotypes. As a result, the media strengthen the gender stereotypes the more they present them. In other words, the longer are children, regardless of age, exposed to the influence of media stereotypes, the more they accept them and consider them real and substantiated.

Children are known to choose the media presentations corresponding with what they learned earlier (Liebert et al., 1973; Morgan, 1982). In commercials, children are often depicted as winners who are perfect, successful, striving for power, success and social acceptance, while the emphasis is put on consumerism (Schor, 2004). Marketing communications often use sophisticated forms enabling to get closer to children than through standard advertising. For example the guerrilla marketing, viral marketing, buzz marketing, community marketing or the recently more and more applied product placement allowing the penetration of brands to television programs, film, computer games, internet portals etc. belong among these forms. Such forms build, among others, on curiosity, suspense from the mysterious, desire for social interaction, personalization and the need of sensory stimulation.

Media texts point out how men should behave to women, how to gain the admiration of women, how to be successful etc. Here, we can see the gender segregated marketing focused on the child consumer – boys are shown as strong, action and dominant individuals emphasizing their masculinity, whereas girls highlight their charm, passivity and femininity (Goldstein, 1994). On the one hand, the presented stereotypes help children adopt their gender roles; on the other hand, they fix the distorted gender representations since these are not depicted in their richness, diversity and various positions. Stereotyping does not concern only children and gender roles but also seniors, immigrants, minorities etc.

This article concentrates on one part – stereotyping of women in media texts. Based on the research findings of several scientists, Báčová (2008) points out the gender schemes that can lead to gender stereotypes, as well as to adversarial attitudes of men towards women and the connection between women’s sexual and social roles. The author suggests that during the socializing process, an individual is confronted with behaviours, characteristics and appearances which the society, with respect to male and female genders, accepts and requires. Every person thus shapes their own cognitive schemes where the role of men and women is defined together with the corresponding features. If women divert from the stereotypical image, they are considered to be strange and untypical (Báčová, 2008).

3. Stereotypes in the Depiction of Women in Media and Advertising Texts

Advertising, both in the synchronic and diachronic points of view, presents a rich and so far not fully exploited archive of stereotyping and stereotypes of women roles within the human world. Expert literature describes and identifies a number of stereotypical forms of depicting women and associated meanings. The most frequent stereotype is so-called sexism, which influences the increase of negative attitudes towards women, confirmation of stereotypical convincing about their presented role and leads to their discrimination (Lott, 1994). In commercials, women are depicted in a submissive and inferior position based on the expected superiority of the male gender.

Another frequent advertising stereotype is the depreciation of women’s social role and social status within a community. Women often play a decorative role when presenting products or services (e.g. cars, computers, tools, building works) without having any factual relationship to them whatsoever. The main message of such commercials is to attract men’s attention. Women in such commercials are shown scantily dressed, in provocative and erotic positions.

Women in advertising are depicted as a passive object of voyeur attention of men, often with perfect appearance suggesting an ideal, a standard, a binding, obligatory, aesthetical canon that women should strive to achieve if they want to be in the centre of attention, loved and happy. In some cases, such a feminine theme is stronger than the original intention and the erotic statement becomes the most important message – women are interpreted as an object of sexual interest of the male predator. In connection with this, a dictionary was created containing mimic,
gesture and proxemic features that express this significant area.

Women in advertising are stereotypically depicted as young, beautiful, seductive and physically attractive. *Youth and beauty* thus become a *myth* preventing the real perception of women. The womanhood simply focuses on the woman’s body and any other area that could divert attention from the *icon of attractiveness* is ignored.

*Submissiveness and indecisiveness* belong among further frequent stereotypes of womanhood. These concepts usually show women in compositionally submissive positions, bending or bowing.

*Women are depicted in authoritative positions* much less often than men and even if they are shown in this way, they usually show men how to operate home appliances etc., which means women are again stereotypically presented in publicly and socially inferior positions.

The stereotype of human and social *dishonour and degradation* involves a woman’s body without a head. In this context, a woman is perceived as someone without needs, emotions and thinking.

One of the most aggressive phallocratic forms of depicting women in advertising may be considered *depicting women* in humiliating positions, *who helplessly and passively accept violence*, usually from male actors. Not only does this justify violence against women but it also shows to be a standard for men’s behaviour towards women, legitimizing the violent acts against women. The escalation of violence is apparent when depicting women during the *act of rape* or as *murdered victims* of criminal acts. It is a striking fact that similar portraits are used by internationally famous and renowned fashion brands (e.g. Sisley, Dolce & Gabbana, JimmyCho).

4. Conclusion

Advertising does not reflect the growing diversity and richness of women’s life, does not capture their achievements and depict the representative variety of real characteristics and skills of women related to their professional carriers etc. Media texts, on the other hand, most frequently show women stereotypically depicted in the concepts of sexism, eroticism, dishonour, social and public inferiority and submissiveness, discrimination, passivity, helplessness and indecisiveness of women and aggression of men.

While children are extremely sensitive and they shape their image about how the world works based on what they see, the mentioned forms of dishonouring and aggressive marketing communications are highly harmful for their development. This is given by the fact that they yet cannot differentiate between fiction and reality. As a result, the above mentioned (verbal and visual) stereotypes presented in advertising, as well as in videogames, journalism or film production, may even lead to the idea that violent relationships between the two genders are standard and that women are passive victims unconditionally accepting the dominance and violence from men’s side.

Therefore, the following question arises: how is it possible to protect children against aggressive forms of marketing communications? We believe that it is essential to increase the consumer literacy of children based on the development of basic attitudes with respect to their wishes, preferences and product evaluation. Education in consumer literacy should be a part of media literacy, similarly to other countries (e.g. the Netherlands, Canada etc.).

However, there is a big space for improvement in Slovakia as media education has been introduced only at some schools, alternatively it is partially included in selected subjects. The aim should be to educate children to become active and critical consumers of both media and marketing communications, not only passive recipients of presented media messages.

These changes can be hardly enforced without coordinated community initiatives. Therefore, another highly significant factor in the educational processes of consumer literacy is the need to develop community initiatives whose objective would be to limit and prevent unethical marketing campaigns suppressing basic human values and encouraging gender dehumanization. Socially responsible media and marketing communications proclaimed by many institutions should lead to the stimulation of mental ease and satisfaction, not to increasing aggressive forms of behaviour.

References


