



## CHILDREN BETWEEN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND COMMERCIALS

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**Abstract:** Our paper deals with the relationship between sustainability, media advertisements and their effect on children. This topic is highly actual today, as the children of today, who grow up in front of the TV will be the consumers of tomorrow. The perpetual growth of consuming and gathering material goods is not serving the sustainable development. However advertisements keep on telling us that we should purchase, buy, have things, as we all are what we can buy. One can buy happiness or become like protagonists featuring in the advertisements. Regardless of the actual programme, this is the overall message of the advertisements. Adults may be able to look at these ads from a critical point of view, but children, who are much more vulnerable in front of the effects of television, tend to take a dreamworld for reality. The aim of the paper is an empirical research on 7-9 years children. The primordial question of our research is the way how the commercials had effect on the children's view on the world, view on themselves, their own and their family's present and future consuming habits.

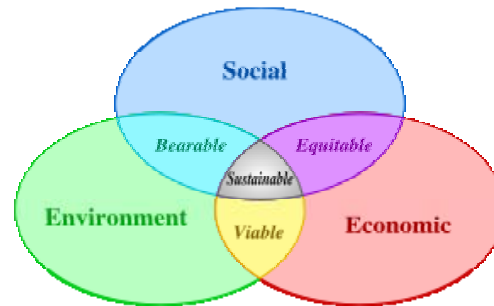
**Key words:** children, sustainable development, commercials

### 1. Introduction

In our days children spend more time watching TV than any other activity, except sleeping. So, the television is the most influential teacher that most children have. After a paper from Oregon State University, we have to consider the fact that until the children graduate from high school, most children will have spent 15000 hours viewing TV, compared to 11000 hours spent in school. Most programs children watch are meant for adults. Also, the television is the most influential teacher of the children. Children are learning from television all the time and programs don't have to be „educational” to teach children. What children learn from the “flickering blue parent” can either interfere or enhance their growth. The purpose of this assignment was to conduct research into the TV viewing habits of the children, and to describe the connection between sustainability, media advertisements and their effects on children.

### 2. What is the sustainable development?

Sustainable development is a pattern of resource use that aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment. This term was used by the Brundtland Commission (1987) and has become the most often used definition of sustainable development. After this definition the sustainable development is a type of development: "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Environmental issues are a major global issue in sustainability. Humans depend on a sustainable and healthy environment, and yet we have damaged the environment in numerous ways. This section introduces other issues including biodiversity, climate change, animal and nature conservation, population, genetically modified food, sustainable development, and more (Wikipedia, 2009).



**Picture 1.** Scheme of sustainable development: at the confluence of three constituent parts (Wikipedia, 2009)

Environmental sustainability is the process of making sure current processes of interaction with the environment are pursued with the idea of keeping the environment as pristine as naturally possible based on ideal-seeking behavior. Sustainable living refers to a lifestyle that attempts to reduce an individual's or society's use of the Earth's natural resource. Practitioners of sustainable living often attempt to reduce their carbon footprint by altering methods of transportation, energy consumption and diet. Proponents of sustainable living aim to conduct their lives in manners that are consistent with sustainability, in natural balance and respectful of humanity's symbiotic relationship with the Earth's natural ecology and cycles. The practice and general philosophy of ecological living is highly interrelated with the overall principles of sustainable development.

### 3. Advertising and children

Advertising is a form of communication used to influence individuals to purchase products. Frequently it communicates a message that includes the name of the product or service and how that product or service could potentially benefit the costumers. Advertising often attempts to persuade potential customers to purchase or to consume a particular brand of product or service. Commercials often seek to generate increased consumption of their products or services through branding, which involves the repetition of an image or a product name in an effort to associate related qualities with the brand in the minds of consumers. There are many types of advertising. The traditional types are like television advertising, radio advertising, print advertising, in-store advertising, and modern types like online advertising, billboard advertising, mobile billboard advertising and others. While advertising can be seen as necessary for economic growth, it is not without negative effects. Advertising is invading public spaces, such as schools, and the advertising could be considered as a form of child exploitation (Wikipedia, 2009). This is true, because advertising frequently uses psychological pressure on the intended consumer, which may be harmful.

Criticism of advertising is closely linked with criticism of media. They can refer to its several aspects like: audio/visual aspects, environmental aspects, political and financial aspects, ethical, moral and social aspects. The most important element of advertising is not information but suggestion more or less making use of association, emotions and drives dormant in the sub-consciousness of people (McChesney, 2008). On the one hand this association could be with to have positive “things” such us: happiness, health, fitness, appearance, self-esteem, reputation, belonging, high social status, adventure, distraction, on the other hand appeal to fear like illness, weaknesses, loneliness, need, uncertainty and others. After Liessmann (2002) advertising exploits the model role of celebrities and popular figures. These factors of how one perceives himself and one’s self worth. In this view advertising is a kind of “mental capitalism”. Advertising also takes the role of a life councillor in matters of attraction. The cult around one’s one attraction is what Lasch (1995) describes as “Culture of Narcissism”. The advertising is influencing and conditioning. That is why the advertising has an important effect on children’s development.

Beside this, children don't have adults' broad experience with the real world. For young children, what they saw in television programmes like commercials, is the real world. They can't tell the difference between what is real and what is make believe, and this can confuse and mislead them. After D. Schechter: "Kids are among the most sophisticated observers of ads. They can sing the jingles and identify the logos, and they often have strong feelings about products. What they generally don't understand, however, are the issues that underlie how advertising works. Mass media are used not only to sell goods but also ideas: how we should behave, what rules are important, who we should respect and what we should value." (Schechter, 2009). Business is interested in children and adolescents because of their buying power and influence on their parents shopping habits and decisions.

#### 4. Advertising to children

Advertising to children is often the subject of debate, relating to the alleged influence on children's consumption. Rules on advertising to children have largely evolved in recent years. Advertising to children is the act of marketing or advertising products or services to children, as defined by national legislation and advertising standards. In most countries, advertising for children is now framed by a mix of legislation and advertising self-regulation. The legislation of advertising to children is very sever in some countries. For example in the United Kingdom, Greece and Belgium advertising to children is restricted and in Quebec, Sweden and Norway advertising to children under the age of 12 is illegal (Wikipedia, 2009).

The European Union has several rules on advertising to children, and this framework legislation was accepted by 27 member states (The EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive). The EU legislation lays it down that the advertising shall not cause moral or psychological detriment to minors. The Rumanian legislation concerning advertisements and children is described in Audio-visual law (Legea Audiovizualului nr. 504 din 11 iulie 2002) and Advertisement Law (Legea nr. 148 din 26 iulie 2000). The National Audiovisual Council control and supervise the commercials to the children's protection with a concern like this.

**Table 1.** *The EU legislation and Roumanian laws concerning advertising to children*

<b>Several EU-wide rules on advertising to children</b>	<b>The Romanian laws concerning advertising to children</b>
<p>a. It shall not directly exhort minors to buy a product or a service by exploiting their inexperience or credulity;</p> <p>b. It shall not directly encourage minors to persuade their parents or others to purchase the goods or services being advertised;</p> <p>c. <i>It shall not exploit the special trust minors place in parents, teachers or other persons;</i></p> <p>d. It shall not unreasonably show minors in dangerous situations</p> <p>e. Children's programmes may only be interrupted if the scheduled duration is longer than 30 minutes</p> <p>f. <i>Product placement is not allowed in children's programmes.</i></p> <p>g. <i>The Member States and the Commission should encourage audiovisual media service providers to develop codes of conduct regarding the advertising of certain foods in children's programmes.</i></p>	<p>a. The advertisement may not encourage the children to buy a product or service by exploiting their credulity and their inexperience (art29/1/a)</p> <p>b. The advertisement shall not encourage minors directly to persuade their parents to purchase goods being advertised (art 29/1/b);</p> <p>c. The advertisement have to be separated with a signal by other programmes (Art. 27).</p> <p>d. The advertisement it shall not show children in dangerous situation (Art. 29/1/d).</p> <p>e. Children's programmes couldn't be interrupted only after 30 minutes (Art. 28/4).</p>

## 5. Research problem and hypothesis

Children and adolescents are important target groups for advertising. There is no doubt that unsuitable programmes like some commercials may adversely have negative affects, because the children are susceptible to the images which they see on the television screen. Because the advertising uses powerful effects to gain more consumers, the children are more influenced by the advertisements like the adults. After van Evra: “Child viewers...are in very active developmental stages. Their attitudes, beliefs, and ideas about the world, as well as physical and social skills, are taking form; and they absorb information from everywhere. Because of the considerable number of hours spent viewing television, however, television becomes a disproportionately informational and attitudinal source” (van Evra, 1990).

*The primordial question of our research is the way how the commercials had effect on the children’s view on the world, view on themselves, their own and their family’s present and future consuming habits.* Starting from this primordial question we formulated several hypotheses. The hypotheses system of our research has a great extent deductive character. Our hypotheses system is the following:

- ✓ The 7-9 year-old-children are influenced by the commercials, the advertisements have bad influence on the children’s consumer habits;
- ✓ The children’s advertisement understanding is defined by their age. The 7-9 year-old children don’t realize that commercials want to influence them;
- ✓ The 7-9 year-old-children are well informed in trade marks;
- ✓ Usually parents don’t mediate and manage their children’s TV viewing, children are left on their own in front of the screen, in front of the commercials;
- ✓ The children have a primordial role of their influence on their parent’s consumers decision and shopping habits;

Based on our research problem 7-9 year-old-children have become the surveyed persons of our research. We have chosen 7-9 old-year-children for our survey because in this age take place important changes related the understanding and critical point of view of the media’s messages. In this age children have their own needs and preferences like consumers. After Schechter: “Kid are among the most sophisticated observers of ads” (2009), and children without adult’s broad experience, they couldn’t always make the difference between what is real and what is make believe. That’s why children are most vulnerable on advertisements effect. After other authors the 7-9 year-old-children realize that the television, isn’t a “magic window”, in spite of this it can show the world in a real way. In the course of sample-taking we have chosen children from first and third classes, from primary schools from Odorheiu Secuiesc and Sanraieni, altogether 43 students. Because we didn’t have the opportunity to use more staged cluster sample taking, that’s why our sample is not representative for 7-9 year-old-children from Rumania. That’s why our results are not representative for this age.

Thus we assumed that the opinion, attitude and believes of the children might be made specific by the surveyed children’s age, gender, living place. In this paper we are preoccupied only by the children’s age on their opinion, attitude and believes connected by advertisements.

In the course of the research we used the questionnaire survey. We did not use standardized questionnaire used in other surveys, but one that was personally elaborated.

## 6. The presentation and interpretation of the results

On the one hand, our questions are related with children’s television viewing habits, their understanding about media and advertisement, on the other hand we have asked them about children and their family’s consumer behaviours. Since the results of the researches about the time spent in the front of the TV are obvious (CNA, 2007), we weren’t concerned of the time, but rather the manner, and the following effects of watching TV, like the understanding and knowledge of advertisement, the parental monitoring of TV-watching, and the mediation of advertisement by the parents.

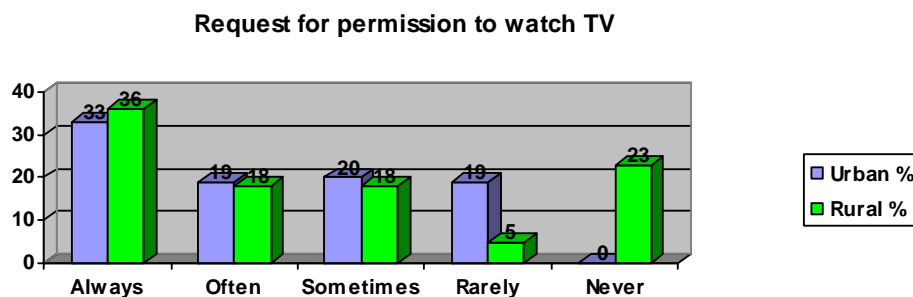
Based on a research made by the National Audiovisual Council of Romania (CNA) in 2007, the Romanian children spend an average of 2 hours daily in the front of the TV: the 6 to 8 years old

children spend 136 minutes daily, the 9 to 11 years old children 151 minutes daily on the weekdays, and more time at the weekend. The greatest part of their spare time is filled by the TV-watching. Probably these results are valid in the case of the children from Odorhei and Sâncrai, too.

### Parental control, mediation and television viewing habits

The question about the permission of watching the TV leads us to the level of the parental control. The important question is whether the children feel that they are under any restrictions regarding the programmes they are allowed to watch. According to an another research from Wales (Lander, 1997): only 24% of surveyed children felt that they have any restrictions on their TV viewing. There was a distinct difference between boys and girls related parents television monitoring of their children. The boys did not wish to admit to restrictions and the girls pay more attention to their parents' wishes. According to a major survey which targeted parents with children under the age of 15 almost half of surveyed parents (41%) said that they have definite rules, 30% of them said that had no rules and only 6% said that they made an effort to control viewing. (Gunter-Svennevig, 1987).

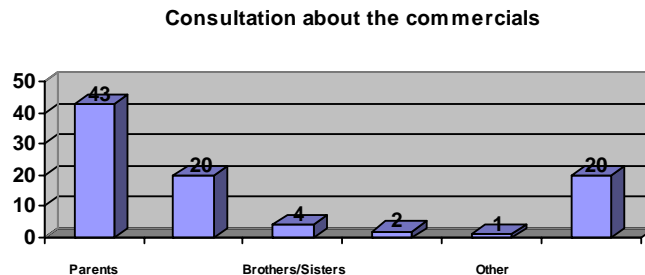
Our results are showing that only one third of the children (35%) asks for permission, and almost a quarter (24%) of them has no parental control at all. Hereafter, it seems that the children from rural areas ask less for permission.



**Figure 2.** Asking for permission from parents, in function of the domicile

It is very probably that not the higher consciousness of the urban parents is behind these results, but the fact that in urban areas children need a frequenter permission because more people share the TV. The adults from urban areas watch more television in their spare time and because of this fact there is a need for compromises. The adults from rural areas have other outdoor activities, and for this reason the permission is avoidable, and all these conditions lead to a higher freedom for children, so they can watch TV without supervision.

The parental mediation it means that the parents take an active part of the TV viewing, 'translating' what they see, explaining the plot, paying a special attention to the unreal sequences, thinking together with the child. From the answers of the children relates that half of them rarely or never discuss the commercials with somebody, so the parents can not help them to understand real meaning of the advertisements. The other part (14%) who discuss about the advertisements, half of them (43%) mentioned their parents and a quarter of them mentioned their friends (26%) as partners for these kind of discussion.



**Figure 3.** *Who are talking children about the commercials with?*

It is obvious that children need their parents to commercials mediating, monitoring. The debates with the friends do not mean real mediating, because it is possible that they talk about the preferences, about the entertainment or the purchasing one of the advertised good. From the answers of the children we found out that they don't talk about ads in school. However parents should have the main role, the lack of the proper parents mediating the school should take responsibility in accordance of this subject.

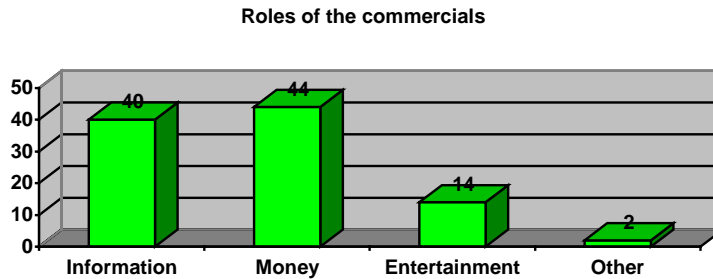
We totally agree with Knausz, who said that the schools responsibility should be the media education and the teaching of the consumers' concepts in order children not to be so vulnerable to the media's influences, to its effects (Knausz, 1999). The school as an institution which satisfies primordial social functions has to face the modern challenges which are required.

### What are the roles of the commercials?

As we mentioned before advertising is a form of communication used to influence individuals to buy products. That's why the advertising frequently communicates a message that includes the name of a product or service (Wikipedia, 2009). The most important element of advertising is not information but suggestion making use of association and emotions of people (McChesney, 2008). The concepts and functions of the commercials we have put the following questions:

- ✓ What is a commercial?
- ✓ Do they have favorite commercials?
- ✓ What is the real meaning of the commercials?
- ✓ In what kind of measure should they admit the advertisements?

With the essence of the advertisements, his concept and his role related answers of the children fundamentally into three categories can be enumerated. The advertisements are used: for information (they are useful), could be bound by money (to encourage shopping, are useful for commercials), and for amusing (entertainment, laughing).



**Figure 4.** *The roles of the commercials after surveyed children*

It is interesting that almost half of the surveyed children (44%) recognize that the advertisements encourage the shopping, at the same time the 40% of the children marked the informational functions, too. The advertisements are useful for informing the consumers about the newest products. As we assumed the children's opinion and beliefs about the advertisements were specific by the children's age. The children's answers related by the advertisements role have been divided in two groups. The 7-8 year-old-children don't realize that the commercials want to influence them, they recognize only the amusing, entertaining character of the advertisements. Some of the 7-8 year-old-children couldn't separate the commercials from other programmes. They saw the commercials so amusing, like other programmes. They could consider the television programmes, commercials the part of the real world. As so they couldn't divide what they saw in television, for example in commercials, they are more influenced by the commercials. After D. Schechter: "Kids are among the most sophisticated observers of ads. They can sing the jingles and identify the logos, and they often have strong feelings about products. What they generally don't understand, however, are the issues that underlie how advertising works. Mass media are used not only to sell goods but also ideas: how we should behave, what rules are important, who we should respect and what we should value." (Schechter, 2009). That's why for advertising the children are an important target group. As we mentioned before business is interested in children and adolescents because of their buying power and influence on their parents shopping habits and decisions.

The most important element of advertising is not information, but suggestion more or less making use of associations, emotions and drives needs in the sub-consciousness of the people. The advertisements influencing and conditioning us. Children under 12 year old are the most vulnerable to the advertisements effect. The academic view that by the age of 12 children have developed their behavior as consumers, effectively recognize advertising and are able to adopt critical attitudes towards it. This confirms Solymosi's opinion, according to which: "The fact that the children do not recognize the real motives and roles of the media and the commercials, make them more vulnerable in front of the media influencing effects. They easily believe what they saw on the screen, and they successful influence their parents shopping decisions" (Solymosi, 2004).

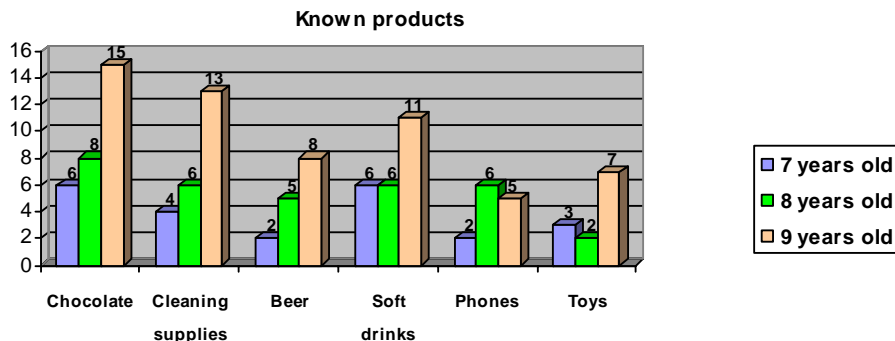
The constant recurrence of the advertisements confirms their effects, so we are not able to evade from commercials effects. Also the 7-8 year-old-children believe in advertisements informational role. After the children the advertisements show us useful information about where could we gain the product. But in reality the commercials already do not satisfy needs, but creates them. Commercials create needs to purchase more and more, not only necessarily things, but more then that. In the 9 old-year-children's answers do not appear the amusing, entertainment function of the commercials. In this age children recognize that somebody profit out of the advertisements. There are important differences between the 7-8 and 9 year-old-children answers.

**Table 2.** *The primordial roles of the commercials after the surveyed children*

The 7-8 year-old-children's answers	The 9 year-old-children's answers
The advertisements role is: - "Let us have fun" - "Make us laugh" - "Make us feel better"	The advertisements role is: - "Let somebody gain more money" - "Let the businessman to gain more customers" - "To convince people to buy some products" - "For the firm's profit, to sold more product".

So not only the adults, but the children live their life in the advertisements dumping and in continually accumulating more and more products. Probably this is the reason why only one third of the surveyed children (28%) have a favorite commercial. This confirms Jhully's opinion after what the advertisements not on by on have effects on children, but these effects increasingly add together (Jhully, 1997). From the point of sustainability these marrying effects are alarming, because these effects leads people to purchase more and more.

We couldn't leave without attention the indirect effects of them commercials. Our results show us that the children take part in the family's shopping on weekdays and weekends, too. The considerable part of the surveyed children (70%) goes with parents to shopping. The children like to go shopping because on this family program they can by something from themselves, too. The children's answer showed that they go to shopping with pleasure, indeed their parents take them take with them their children, ask their opinion when want to by bigger things. The children are socialized for consumption, for young ages they take part in their parent's consumer decisions. According to Müller: "After these shopping experiences children easily realize that these consumer needs how quickly and simply could be satisfied" (Müller, 2001). The children knew a lot of trade marks.

**Figure 5.** *How many trademarks do the children know?*

The trademark knowledge of the asked children is astonishing. The 7 year-old-children named altogether 23, the 8 year-old-children named 33 and the 9 year-old-children named altogether 59 trade marks. A considerable part of these trade marks they did not know by experimental way, but it was obtained by commercials. It seems that their trademark knowledge quasi doubles under a year, and probable, that influences their parents' purchase habits and decisions.



### 3. Conclusion

There is no doubt that the 7-9 year-old-children are influenced by the commercials, and the commercials had bad influence on the children's shopping and consumer habits. The commercials influenced them because they spent more time viewing television, they viewing television programmes like commercials without parental monitoring, and the advertising is a special form of communication used to influence individuals to purchase products. The advertising use special effects for influencing and conditioning the viewers, and the advertising frequently uses psychological pressure on the intended consumer. The children don't have the adults broad experience with the real world, sometimes they can't difference what is real and what is make believe from the commercials. That's why the commercials could be considered as a form of child exploitation (Wikipedia, 2009). The children's advertisement understanding is defined by their age, the 7-8 year-old-children recognize only the informational function of the advertisements, and don't realize that commercials want to influence them. The 7-9 year-old-children are well informed in trade marks and it seems that their trademark knowledge quasi doubles under a year. Usually parents don't mediate their children's commercials viewing, because they don't think that is a primordial question in their children's development. The surveyed children take active part in their family's shopping and influenced by the commercials determinate their parents consumers decisions and habits. The family's shopping is one of the favorite activities of the surveyed children. In our days the children are socialized for consumption, for purchase and gathering more and more, and this fact is not good from the point of the sustainable development. The schools responsibility should be the media education and to teach children to be wiser consumers of tomorrow.

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