
THE IMPACT OF MARKETING ON CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING IN A DIGITAL AGE

Editorial

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Editorial: the impact of marketing on children's well-being in a digital age

One of the major considerations for marketers today is the need to examine their own practices when marketing to child audiences. The advent of immersive, digital and online platforms, so attractive to children of all ages, makes this need ever more urgent. The wealth of research on more traditional forms of communication, such as television advertising and print media is yet to be balanced by research into newer forms, such as mobile applications, social networking sites and advergames. When children's well-being is considered, the challenge becomes even more salient because of the nature of much of the marketing aimed at this audience. Recently published research focusing on digital marketing and children has featured largely in health promotion and food journals (Boelsen-Robinson *et al.*, 2015; Cheyne *et al.*, 2013; Folkvord *et al.*, 2013; Hudson and Elliott, 2013; Kelly *et al.*, 2015). With this special section of the *European Journal of Marketing* devoted to the impact that the digital age might have on the well-being of children, we place the debate firmly within the marketing discipline. Not simply in view of what products are promoted (although this is important, e.g., High in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) food products) but the impact upon the well-being of children and the knowledge they hold around new marketing strategies. How are children (and their parents) negotiating this dynamic environment and what exactly are marketers' strategies and responsibilities in this digital age?

Today, children are increasingly sophisticated adopters and users of new media; however, this digital environment arguably plays upon their vulnerability, particularly through the interactive, subtle and engaging nature of non-traditional advertising and marketing practices (Freeman and Shapiro, 2014). Academic knowledge of children's inherent limitations in understanding advertising and their susceptibility to commercial persuasion before the age of 8-12 is well-established (Rozendaal *et al.*, 2011). It is important to note though, that much of this research relates to the more traditional forms of advertising and fewer commercial media platforms (Gunter *et al.*, 2005). Nowadays, however, children are increasingly embracing non-traditional media platforms such as interactive games, social networking sites and branded websites (Vanwesenbeeck *et al.*, 2016). These online platforms differ from traditional media in that they seek to offer children the facility for play, entertainment and immersion in the overall experience over a longer period of time (Verhellen *et al.*, 2014). A widely expressed concern in the literature is that the embedded, interactive and entertaining capabilities of online platforms can lead to commercial messages exerting more subtle and persuasive effects on children, who also may not be fully aware of the nature and purpose of these

commercial messages (Owen *et al.*, 2013; Rozendaal *et al.*, 2011). Given the appeal of new technologies to children and the integrated and interactive nature of the commercial messages in them, it is important to re-visit children's abilities and vulnerabilities in this changing environment (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012).

Little is actually known about the convergence of traditional and digital media and their synergistic impact, or the extent and nature of children's engagement with commercial messages in new media (Brown and Bobkowski, 2011; Montgomery *et al.*, 2011; Freeman and Shapiro, 2014; Panic *et al.*, 2013). Importantly, the substantial increase in children's digital media usage and its characteristically interactive engagement is matched neither by research that investigates the risks of such exposure to children's social development and well-being (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012; Calvert, 2008), nor by how families, educators or society can manage and support children's digital media socialisation (Clarke and Svanaes, 2012). The literature acknowledges a need for longitudinal studies that focus on the convergence of media, their synergistic impact (Montgomery *et al.*, 2011; Brown and Bobkowski, 2011) and their long-term impact on children's well-being, as well as research, which addresses the wider social and family contexts of class, gender, ethnicity, parental style and media literacy (Buckingham, 2007). The papers chosen for this special section directly address many of these concerns, in particular, parental style (Bettany and Kerrane, 2016), media literacy (Lawlor *et al.*, 2016; Davis and Confos, 2016) and advertising's long-term effects on well-being (Oprea *et al.*, 2016).

We put together this special section to identify novel research which advances our understanding of marketing to children in this digital age, and what effect, if any, this might have on their well-being. Our Call for Papers (CfP) resulted in manuscripts being submitted from countries across Asia, Australasia and Europe. These articles interpreted the CfP in interesting and diverse ways, involving a variety of approaches, theories and methods. These manuscripts underwent up to three rounds of peer review and revision before eventual acceptance or rejection. The four that are included in this special section are all very different but have the common thread of providing insights into contemporary digital marketing practices and the impact these have on children's well-being. They provoke considerations of policy and practice, suggesting guidance to policymakers as they debate regulating the online, commercial environment, which raises very different issues to current offline advertising regulations and policies.

Here, we provide a summary of each article, presented in the order in which they appear in the special section. The first paper begins by addressing the relationship between advertising and well-being and is followed by two papers which examine marketing strategies across several different digital media platforms. The fourth paper moves the debate into new territory by critically examining emerging mobile technologies in family life.

The first paper entitled "The impact of advertising on children's psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction" by Oprea *et al.* (2016) directly addresses the topic of the special section, asking whether advertising decreases children's well-being by examining the relationship between advertising exposure, dimensions of psychological well-being and life satisfaction. The study uses a large sample of 8-12 year olds and a longitudinal design, allowing conclusions about the causal effects of advertising exposure. The paper reveals a complex relationship between advertising, well-being and life satisfaction. For example, the authors find that advertising encourages some aspects of well-being, which in turn positively influence life satisfaction (e.g. personal growth and autonomy), while others (e.g. purpose in life) are negatively influenced.

Further, advertising shows no relationship with self-acceptance and positive relationships with others, which are important indicators for life satisfaction. Oprea *et al.* (2016) conclude that it is too simple to state that all advertising is negative, as it may encourage some positive aspects of psychological well-being, such as environmental mastery, personal growth and autonomy. However, they call for further longitudinal research looking at the accumulating effects of advertising on children's psychological well-being and life satisfaction.

The second paper, by Davis and Confos (2016) entitled "Young consumer-brand relationship building potential using digital marketing", identifies how six prominent food brands, which advertise across three different digital marketing platforms, build and maintain brand relationships with children. Davis and Confos begin their paper by discussing the increasingly integrated role that digital media plays in children's lives, outlining the clear increase in mobile and online advertising to children. The authors explore how brands are integrated in digital media, specifically how advergames and other website interactions are used to persuade and influence brand attitudes. They focus on the strategies used by food manufacturers in digital media to communicate with young consumers and the potential for brand relationship building between food brands and younger consumers in this digital context. The paper reports on a content analysis of six food companies (mostly producers of HFSS foods) across three digital media platforms: Facebook, advergames and mobile applications. Analysis of these platforms uncovers four common strategies adopted by marketers, which Davis and Confos argue clearly demonstrate a "relationship-building thrust to the branding strategy": brand as a prize (positive brand reinforcement through the brand as a reward); brand as educator/entertainer (play with the brand online); brand as social enabler (make friends and social networks through the brand); and brand as a person (brand personification). Davis and Confos conclude that in the context of the online environment, the brand is an interactive partner with assigned human qualities, engaging in a two-way relationship with children, for example through direct posts and tweets. Davis and Confos discuss policy implications within the context of children's well-being and conclude that the next stage needs to be talking to the young consumers themselves to understand, more fully, their engagement with the brands in this online context.

The research undertaken by Lawlor *et al.* (2016), entitled "Young consumers' brand communications literacy in a social networking site context", appropriately follows the paper by Davis and Confos by talking to children themselves about online branding. Their paper addresses the gap in the literature with regard to children's commercial awareness and advertising literacy in the context of online social networking sites (SNS). Lawlor, Dunne and Rowley's paper provides a fascinating insight into the social media-branded lives of 12- to 14-year-old girls in Ireland. The primary aim of this study was to explore the nature and extent of advertising literacy amongst the girls in the context of their use of online social networking sites. Their findings reinforce the concern that younger consumers have difficulty identifying the nature of advertising in the context of a non-traditional medium compared to traditional media such as television. The participants have a very narrow view of what constitutes commercial content in a social networking environment, and, more compellingly, they are unaware of the behavioural changes that advertisers sought to bring about in them, such as brand-related, sharing behaviours. As such, the authors express

concern for the well-being of 12-14 year olds, who are potentially vulnerable to commercial and other exploitation, as they have not met a key criterion of commercial literacy, namely, an ability to understand the commercial agenda of the marketer. The authors also recognise the need for a new conceptualisation of advertising literacy in an online context, which is informed by the increasing convergence of traditional online advertising and other forms of online brand content. Hence, they propose the Online Brand Communications (OBC) literacy framework. The study has implications for public policy in that further attention needs to be given to how children are being educated about the range of advertising techniques and marketing formats. The study also questions whether traditional consumer socialisation literature – which considers 11-16 year olds as knowledgeable, reflective and sophisticated – is still true in the digital environment and calls for more research on children's perspectives on new forms of advertising.

The fourth paper, by Bettany and Kerrane (2016) entitled “The socio-materiality of parental style: negotiating the multiple affordances of parenting and child welfare within the new child surveillance technology market”, takes the reader on a stimulating journey into quite a different context of the digital world and its impact upon the well-being of children, with an analysis of parental style and child welfare in relation to child surveillance technologies (CST) – specifically child GPS trackers (CGT). Bettany and Kerrane introduce us to various examples of CGT, along with a critical review of the marketing of CGT products to children and parents. They go on to argue that although we might associate the helicopter parental style with the adoption of CGT, we in fact need to develop the parental style literature to account for such emerging mobile technologies – which afford parents the ability to act at a distance. Bettany and Kerrane approach this from a socio-material theoretical lens – specifically the authors combine neutralisation and affordance theory to explain their data. The methodology for this paper involves netnography on relevant online communities; multiple online sites and forums are analysed over a 12-month period, including news sites, product launch forums, product review sites and popular parental forums. Results of the netnography are positioned under three main areas: online criticisms directed at parents who use or might use CGT; the techniques used by parents to counteract such criticism (drawing upon neutralisation theory); and, finally, how parental purchasers re-afford the technology. By taking this particular theoretical and methodological approach, the authors provide us with new knowledge on parental styles and contribute to the theory of new product adoption (particularly this controversial new digital technology). Bettany and Kerrane conclude with a conceptual shift away from parental style, towards parental affordances – uncovering how “being a good parent” is played out in the context of new child surveillance technologies.

In conclusion, as editors of this special section of the *European Journal of Marketing*, we hope that this collection of papers will inspire new research and further insights into this important area. We thank the ten authors of these four papers, and also acknowledge the hard work of all the authors who submitted their paper for consideration in this issue. We also thank all the reviewers who generously provided their time, expertise and feedback throughout the whole process.

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