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## **Children in the world of commercials. Some thoughts concerning the relationship between children and advertisement**

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# CHILDREN IN THE WORLD OF COMMERCIALS

## SOME THOUGHTS CONCERNING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHILDREN AND ADVERTISEMENT

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**Abstract:** *Our paper deals with the relationship between media advertisements and their effect on children's development. This topic is highly actual to day, as the children of today, who grow up in front of the TV will be the consumers of tomorrow. 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 dream world for reality. The primordial question of our theoretical essay 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. The commercials influenced them because they spent more time viewing television, they viewed television programs like commercials without parental monitoring, and the advertising is a special form of communication used to influence individuals to purchase products. The advertising uses 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. The children's advertisement understanding is defined by their age. Usually parents don't mediate their children's commercial viewing. The schools responsibility should be the different types of media education.*

**Keywords:** *mediatized environment, children, commercials, consumer*

### 1 Introduction

Nowadays children spend a lot of time in front of the screen, in front of the computer and in front of the TV. In our informational, knowledge based and media influenced society the children spend more and more time in front of the screen and they do not obtain the bigger proportion of their knowledge related by the world on the direct way by their personal experience, but through the one-way channel communication of the media.

According to an American survey (1988) children spend the most of the time viewing television besides sleeping. We can admit as a fact that until the high school graduation an American child during his or her lifetime spends 15,000 hours in front of the TV, as long as they spend 11,000 hours at school.

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Meanwhile during this time they watch programs mainly made for adults. After the results of an UNESCO commission research which surveyed in 1996-1997 more than 5000 teenage children from 23 countries all over the world: 91% of the surveyed children's home have television and they spend at least 50% more time in front of the screen than any other extra school activities (moving like leisure activity, reading, homework and other activities). According to another research the weekly average viewing TV activities of children before they get into a school exceeds the time that they will spend later in the school (László 1999). It seems that on one hand we have to accept as a fact the socializing role of the media. On the other hand theoretical models concerning the media's effects call attention on children's' and youngsters' vulnerability on these effects.

The question is not anymore how can we save the children from the negative and less damaging influence of the media, but the real question is how can we teach them to cope with these effects and to prepare them to be some conscious consumers. Our paper deals with the relationship between media advertisements and their effect on children's development. 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. 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 dream world for reality. The primordial question of our theoretical essay 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, and how strong are these effects. The commercials influenced them because they spent more time viewing television, they viewing television programs like commercials without parental monitoring, and the advertising is a special form of communication used to influence individuals to purchase products.

## **2 Some aspects in the relationship between the media and the children**

The media as a modern communication mean has changed the people's lives. It has changed because it is one of the most important communication sources, it has transformed our spare time and beside this it influences our opinion, behavior and attitude too. The media is a considerable source of getting us informed about a world, we have the possibility to get to know our world through it.

The mass-communication is a process; the mass-media is its channel, which is capable to transport messages through a big distance, to transmit for a lot of people in the same time (N. Kollár, Szabó 2004). The media is a multifunctional tools system, in the mean time its effects prevail in a much combined way. From these roles the most important are: public education, dissemination of

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knowledge, information, entertainment, value creation, value passing and last but not least general taste development. Angelusz (1996) describes three functions of the mass-communications, which are: norm creation, the integration of individual behavior and formation of new familiar habits. Knausz (2001) emphasizes the media's identification patterns for young people. The research surveys which aim the youngsters' values show us that the idols, the identification patterns are not the most appropriate in the most of the cases. According to Sallai (1998) the idols of the youngsters generally are: young, good looking, slim, healthy, optimistic, violent, autonomous, emotional, confident, law tolerant, wealthy persons, without any ethical norms. Knausz (2001) warns that the programs show lovely people with whom children could identify immediately. They do not even notice that they want to be like them, and there lovely persons became their idols. This can be very dangerous.

The influence of the media depends on the viewers' age. The fact that the functions of the mass-media succeed in a combined way, can be related with the experience of it, and for this reason the influence on children is stronger than on adults. The value creative role of the media and the general taste developing functions differ according to adults and children. The media's influence in passing value and creating idols is stronger in the case of the youngsters whose environment does not give any positive models. The ambiguity of the media refers to the values too, because it transmits positive and negative values as well. The media's influence on value transmitting differs from school to school. This difference, besides other characteristics, is due to the fact that school is compulsory and the media is not. That's why the school has to face with the media influenced society expectations. The media's influences on the children's esthetical taste cannot be neglected either. Besides the value creative programs, like valuable cartoons, there are a lot of low level productions, like low budget films.

The value passing and the identity creation roles of the media can not be negligible in the adolescence. On the one hand the media has main effects on the youngsters' views and concepts; on the other hand the main objective of the adolescence is the realization of the identity. After Havinghurst (1972) there are some important development tasks of adolescence:

- Develop appropriate and mature relationships with people of both sexes
- Achieve emotional independence
- Accept their physique and use their body effectively
- Develop social roles
- Prepare for adult life and adult relationship
- Prepare for career, education and other pursuits
- Acquire values and ethics, develop ideology
- Behave in a socially acceptable way with people of different ages, gender and social background.

The youngsters rarely find models from their environment that can be accepted by them in all ways, and the models shown in the media are not suitable onto

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follow. The media contents have considerable effects on the youngsters' body image. For example the female idols are very thin, the men models are extremely kneaded, muscular persons. This can affect the teenagers and can induce discontent with their body, because in this period they are especially interested in their body and their body image. This increases the probability of appearance of different eating disorders (like anorexia or bulimia) at the girls and medicine, steroid picking at the boys. Thus, after the media boys are socialized to be muscular and strong, females are socialized to be skinny and weak. On the one hand, the male role models in the mass-media are generally portrayed as bigger and stronger. A larger body is valued positively by males and is representative of males' greater power and authority in the society.

On the other hand the female models are very thin. The desire to be slim could be so deeply ingrained in girls and women that even if they are not overweight; they often perceive themselves as overweight. An American research shows that over 60% of young women report that they want to lose weight, meanwhile only 2% are actually overweight. Further, the majority of young women report that they want to lose weight. Women constantly desire and strive to achieve thinner bodies because they believe this will make them more attractive to men. However, surveys show that young men prefer women who are heavier than the cultural "ideal" depicted in the mass media (Kasper 1998). Unfortunately, the female role models shown in the mass-media reinforce thinness as the norm for women. Thus, the mass-media provide girls and women with a constant reminder of their inadequacy about their weight, keeping them in a state of insecurity about their appearance. The mass-media further complicates the issue, because it presents conflicting messages for women and girls. While commercials send messages that the ideal women must be thin, at the same time a major part of the ads encourages the consumption and enjoyment of food. These conflicting messages reinforce the preoccupation of women with weight control and struggle for perfection. These idols represented by the media are very dangerous, because they can affect the girls and boys body images even from the adolescence.

But we must not forget that the effects of the media depend on the adolescent's personal characteristics, too. Usually those teenagers – who are in conflict with their environment, who have problems with other children of the same age and teenagers with lower self-evaluation – are viewing more television (Bryant, Thompson, after N. Kollár, Szabó, 2004: 585).

There are many essays about the positive and negative effects of the media on adults and children. Our lives will remain incomplete without the media, but the excessive media consumption has its dangers too. It is obvious, that the general effects of the media constitute only one of the socialization agents and the effects on personality development could be equally positive and negative. It may be not only a chance that the most of the special literature deals more with the negative effects of the media. The media, the television programs could effect children's development in several ways.

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The most important *effects which interference* with children's personal development are:

- The media could be the source of unprocessed and ambiguous information, what can confuse and mislead them;
- The media programs can speed the perception by their visual effects. The fast image changes, cuts and camera statements are not always traceable for the children;
- The models shown in the media rarely are suitable for children and teenagers, and these idols could be unnoticed identification samples;
- The media "reinterprets the childhood", because children view frequently programs made for adults;
- The media programs simplifies the reality and could present the real world worse and crueler that the real world is;
- As we mentioned before, the slim women and muscular men appearing in media could generate continuously frustration and inferiority feeling in youngsters;
- The television programs could create inactivity. Children who spend more time in front of screen can become passive, they lose chances to be creative, to use their minds in different ways, and develop their manual skills;
- There is an indirect connection between TV violence and violence in our society; Violence can create fear, negative attitudes, and violent behavior;
- Some television contents (like commercials) could create desire for unhealthy, sugary foods and toys, induces children toward more and more consumption and purchase<sup>1</sup>.

Children do not have the adults' broad experience with the real world. For this reason depending on age, sometimes they can not realize the difference between what is the real world and what is the fiction, and this can confuse and mislead them.

In spite of these facts, the media could have *positive effects*, could *enhance the children growth* and *personality development*. The most important positive effects are:

- The contents of the media, especially television programs can be also a "window on the world", can broaden children's knowledge and interests by introducing them to: things they have never seen, places they have never been and people they have never met from all over the world. Their knowledge increases by viewing geographical channels, quiz programs, scientific broadcasts and programs of different fields;
- By some programs children can learn useful skills of reading, counting, spelling and in special situations problem-solving skills, some programs and games could also increase their logical thinking;

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<sup>1</sup> Knausz 2001; Müller 2001; Cole, Cole 2003

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- Some of the media contents can show positive models, can transfer positive and healthy attitudes toward children, and can create positive social attitudes and characteristics like tolerance, compassion, cooperation, sharing, courage, self-confidence, self-control.

As we can see, in our century the media became one of the most powerful socialization agents and one of the most effective opinion-makers. Most of the people, and soon most of the children can not live without the television, the Internet or radio. Because of this the following question arises: is media a blessing or a curse? The answer is evident: could be both of them, blessing and curse too. The positive effects of the media could be wisely used to enhance the children's development, but the improper programs watched by children and over exposure to media may interference with children's development in many ways.

The possible dangers of the media consumption do not inevitably have to turn into real dangers, because on the one hand viewers may respond different to the same media content, and the other hand the children's viewing habits, the children's age, life experience and last, but not least the parental control play a primordial role in this complex question.

### 3      **Why just the advertisements?**

Advertising is a form of communication used to influence individuals and 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 consumers. Advertising often attempts to persuade potential customers to purchase or to consume a particular brand of product or service (Wikipedia 2009). 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. After Kollár and Szabó: *„The advertising is the most typical example for the deliberate effect of the media”* (2004: 516). The advertising came to existence to influence the consumers, that's why it would lose its sense without the influencing role.

The appearance of the advertisements comes from antiquity, but we can talk about the modern advertising industry from the turning of the 19-20 century. The primordial functions of the advertising went through considerable changes, so certain sections of the advertising industry can be separated.

- *In the beginnings*, in the industrialization period the advertisements had informational function, the ads informed the consumers about the product or service.
- In the *second era* advertisements were associated to values attractive to customers like health, happiness, good-looking, self-confidence, and

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wealth. The ads link these values to consuming a special product or service.

- In the *third period* the commercials have to wrestle with a more and more demanding consumer, the multi-sensorial ads have to gain the consumers. The advertisement dumping associates false values and promises, and the ads have to use humor, inventiveness and expertise to seduce consumers.

Nowadays there are many types of advertising. The *traditional types* are 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, airports, doctors' offices, movie theaters, hospitals, gas stations, elevators, convenience stores, on the Internet. After Jhally (1997) advertising invades our lives and advertising has infiltrated our culture. If we compare the ads from the turn of the 19 century to ads of our days, we can find several differences. The modern ads no longer talk about the properties of the products being sold, but link with powerful images of the sources of human happiness. The images and values shown by commercials create emotions and desires in viewers, frequently use psychological pressure on the intended consumer and for this reason the ads have main effects on viewers.

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 as: happiness, health, fitness, appearance, self-esteem, reputation, belonging, high social status, adventure, and distraction, on the other hand appeal to fears like illness, weaknesses, loneliness, need, uncertainty and others. There is the AIDA-model in the advertising industry, which influenced the viewers by four tools: attention, interest, desire and action.

The titles of Jhally's essays are very suggestive „*Advertising and the end of the world*“ and „*Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse*“. Jhally connects the dumping of advertising with purchasing, consuming and gathering more and more. There are several models and paradigms against advertising. The communication scientist and media economist M. Knoche shows that advertising isn't just a "necessary evil" but a "necessary elixir of life" for the media business, the economy and capitalism. He describes advertisements as "producers' weapons in the competition for consumers". Lasch connects advertising industry to purchasing in our consumer society, and the consumption became a "way of life". 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 councilor in matters of



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attraction. The cult around one's one attraction is what Lasch (1995) describes as "*Culture of Narcissism*".

#### **4 The special relationship between children and commercials**

There is a special relationship between children and commercials. On the one hand this relationship shows all characteristics of the children and media connection, on the other hand this relationship is special, because of the seducing, influencing and product purchasing functions of the commercials. *The primordial question of our theoretical essay is the way how the commercials had effect on the children's concepts, behavior, view on the world, view on themselves, their own and their family's present and future consuming habits.* Advertising to children is often the subject of debate; several researches show that children are more vulnerable on the commercials effects, than adults. As we mentioned before the advertising is influencing and conditioning us. For this reason the advertising has an important effect on children's development. Besides this, children don't have adults' broad experience with the real world. For young children the real world is what they see in television programs, like commercials. They can not tell the difference between what is real and what is "make believe", and this can confuse and mislead them.

Similarly to other media programs the *effects of the advertisements depend on the viewers' age*. There is a connection between children and ads from the youngest age of them. The children realize approximately at 10 months that by pressing the remote control the image from the screen changes, so the "expedient" watching TV begins at this time. We can talk about conscious program selection mostly at 2 year old children, but a 3 year old child can distinguish the different advertisements, logos, trademarks from each other after the different colors, forms and melodies. According to surveys one fourth of the 3 year-old-children already insist for certain trademarks and influence their parents consumer decisions, the nursery school-aged ones constitute the most endangered group after all (Müller 2001). The nursery school-aged children already recognize the ads and the advertised products (for example after the logo or the ads melodies), but they do not see clearly the primordial functions of the commercials yet. At this age children are in the primary socialization stage, and they ascribe motivational, informational and entertaining function equally for the commercials. The children's attitude to commercials is generally better at this age, than their parents' attitude, because the advertisements present an ideal world for the small ones, where the family is together in the largest harmony. Whereas for the adults it's a certain fact that the commercials do not reflect the reality; the children are not able to separate the fiction from the real world, and for this reason they can not distinguish the original and the magical characteristics of the product. It is obvious why the great "advertisement opponent" S. Jhally called the commercials "*fantasy-factory*" and "*dream world*". At 7-10 years, children start to doubt about the truthfulness of the advertisement

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contents, but they recognize the real intentions that are lying behind the publicity only in adolescence. At this time they realize that the advertisement's informational function could be deformed in marketing interests, while by the adolescence the considerable part of the consumer habits of children are already formed and these concepts and habits could be hardly modified.

Usually children have more positive attitude towards commercials, than adults. For this reason children are more vulnerable, facile and impressionable against the ads than adults. After Jhally (1997) advertising is so attractive, powerful and seductive to adults and children as well, because it offers them images of the real sources of human happiness. The appeals made by advertising are very real, they tap to people's emotions and desires, but the answers it provides are false. The higher vulnerability of children by the commercials is in connection with the characteristics defined by the age.

The nursery school-aged-children have typical egocentric mentality; that can be characterized by childlike greed, collecting obsession and competitive spirit, and lower broad of experience with the real world, as by the adults and continuous learning attitude. Children can not always realize the difference between the real and the "make-believe".

## 5 Children as little (media) consumers

As we mentioned before the children don't have adults' broad experience with the real world. For young children, what they see in television programs/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).*

On the one hand is given the powerful effect of the commercials, on the other hand the influence and vulnerability of children, and for this reason advertising to children is often the subject of debate, relating to the alleged influence on children's consumption. Rules on advertising for children have largely involved in recent years. Advertising for children as the act of marketing or advertising products or services for them, is 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 severe in some countries. For example in the United Kingdom, Greece and Belgium advertising to children is restricted and in Quebec,

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Sweden and Norway advertising for 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 puts down that the advertising shall not cause moral or psychological detriment to minors. The Romanian legislation concerning advertisements and children is described in the Audiovisual law (Legea Audiovizualului nr. 504 din 11 iulie 2002) and in the Advertisement Law (Legea nr. 148 din 26 iulie 2000). The National Audiovisual Council controls and supervises the commercials to the children's protection with a concern like this.

There are interesting, sometimes frightening ideas about the advertisements effects on adults and children. After McChesney (2008) the commercials are influencing and conditioning the viewers, and the most important functions of the ads are not the informational, but the emotional and suggestional ones. The ads use associations and appeal to emotions. From this point of view the commercials create a kind of "mental capitalism", after Franck: *"Evidently, in a society in which revenue of attention moves to fore, consumption is drawn by one's self-esteem"*. The commercials could take the role of the life counselor in matters of attraction (Lasch 1995).

Commercials influence children first of all by their images, by their symbolic system, melodies and persons and animals which appear in commercials. Müller (2001) delimits the types of commercials liked and not liked by children.

Children do not like commercials which:

- advertise uninteresting products for children
- are too often visible and for this reason are already boring
- are too simple and trying to convince them with too childish texts
- are not understandable for children
- have too abstract images and symbolic systems for children and for this reason induce fear in them.

Those advertisements are liked by children in which:

- there is a little story built up around the advertised product and the trade mark appears incidentally at the end
- there is a pleasant music or an easily learned melody and text
- need critical thinking and its slogans demanding association
- appears a harmonious family, children and pets like cats, dogs
- appears a fantastic, unreal and wonderful world and this world does not rise fear in children
- the humor is an essential element.

As the children are easier influenced, they are especially targeted by the advertising industry. Business is interested in children and adolescents because of their buying power and influence on their parents shopping habits and decisions. Advertising could be considered as a form of child exploitation.

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Although this question would not have been priority a hundred years earlier, in our days it could be a primordial question. So the children and youngsters are primarily targeted group by market. Until school-age the children can not really deal with the real value of the money, but also they have indirectly buying power through their parents. It is not by coincidence, that the school-age-children are called in the marketing trade SKIPPIE, as School Kids with Income and Purchasing Power. The school-age-children have a considerable purchasing power. The children are not "small adults", but a new consumer group, a special one. The children are a special targeted group by the market from three viewpoints.

- Children are primary consumers (*primary purchasers*) by their pocket money. International surveys show that children's consumption based on their own pocket money increased significantly. Children are from this viewpoint very demanding consumers, who are in the same time very easy to win and very easy to lose;
- Children are influencing consumers (*purchase influencers*) by their increasing effect on their family's purchase decisions and habits. From this viewpoint children appear as indirect consumers by their own wishes accomplished by parents;
- In the same time children are the *future consumers* too. The children from our days became brand-loyal adults for tomorrow. Because of this the market tries to influence children to become trademark loyal important future consumers (Wikipedia 2009).

## 6 Conclusions and possible solutions

As we mentioned in the Introduction there is a complex relationship between children and commercials that is why according to our opinion this is an actual research problem. In our days of informational and mediatized society the contents of the media became important agents of the socialization process. Children are from the youngest age in constant connection with the media. The media is a source of information for children and the main part of their knowledge from the world come from it. The media could be a "window on the world" for them.

The advertisements as the patterns of the deliberate and purposeful media effects are important advisers, leaders or even masters for the growing generation. The ethical expectation intended against ads is that the consumer who is reached by the commercial messages to be acknowledged that he is influenced by them and pursued to purchase goods. In this context the children until a certain age (until 12-14 years) are totally defenseless in front of commercials. The advertisements try to convince the children primarily not cognitive, but on emotional way. On the one hand there must be an ethical and pedagogical responsibility of the advertising industry for the children. On the other hand our opinion is that this responsibility couldn't be the task of only the

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advertising industry. In this question the family education and the school have to take responsibility too.

Primarily, the *advertising regulation* is the first step. The more detailed and the more complex regulation and national standards which take into consideration the psychological aspects of children's development could be a solution for this problem. From the other viewpoint the overregulation of the advertising activity would violate the right of the freedom of opinion, of speech and self expression, which is guaranteed constitutionally. The Romanian advertising legislation is similar to ones in the European Union.

Several studies have concluded that *parents* play a crucial role *in mediating potentially negative effects* of the television programs content. The supervision, guidance and control of parents have been considered key to overcoming television's potential negative effects. There are several ways how parents could mediate their children's television viewing and could help their children in cognitive and emotional treating of media contents or of advertising effects. There are *three distinct types of parental mediation* as restrictive mediation, co viewing and instructive mediation. The *restrictive mediation* includes parental rules regarding the amount, time of viewing, and permissible or forbidden types of content. The *parent-child co viewing* is defined as shared viewing with no purposeful discussion of content, while the *instructive mediation* is a discussion between parent and child, which aims are to interpret television content to children. Referring to commercials the instructive mediation is the most efficient type of parental mediating. According to the parental mediation of the commercials the instructive mediation type is the best. Both, the short and the long-term aims of the parental mediation of the commercials contains the exploitation of the positive effects of the commercials, filtering the deleterious effects, increasing the media consciousness and preparing children to become conscious consumers of tomorrow. In the forming of the correct consciousness consumption habits of the children beside the instructive parental mediation of the commercials could have the same efficiency the suitable parental pattern of the consumption.

Last, but not least in this question the *school's role* could not be negligible. In our mediatized society, the more schools realize the unlocks of the parental mediation, the more they have to take a bigger role in the children's media education. The base of the media education should be the conceptualization with the main concepts of the media literacy. On the one hand media education aims are to enable children to analyze, evaluate and create different messages of the media, on the other hand to create conscious consumer habits in children.

To sum up, according to our point of view the greatest forthcoming challenge of the tomorrow's institutional education is to transform the children of today into conscious and critical consumers of tomorrow.

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