

Materialism Unwrapped: Examining the Values Promoted in Television Commercials for Games and Toys During the Holiday Season. A Content Analysis of December 2020 and 2021

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Abstract

Games and toys advertisements play an instrumental role in consumers' socialisation process. They help children discover the products available on the market, and shape their desires, attitudes and behaviour according to the values promoted. In this paper we aimed to identify whether Romanian toy and game advertisements encourage materialism. Based on the literature on materialism we constructed codes for content analysis using four characteristics: happiness associated with possession of a toy, addressability to the child, collectability and increased self-esteem. Based on these four codes we conducted a content analysis of TV ads for games and toys from December 2020 and December 2021. We analysed seven TV channels, 2070 minutes of content each year and 248 ads. The results illustrated that materialism is encouraged in the majority of TV ads. The research brings attention to the ethics of promoting products to children.

Key words: materialism, values, children advertising, games, and toys

J.E.L. classification: M37

1. Introduction

We are exposed to a considerable amount of media hype and a diversity of products on the market. We live in a consumer society where everything encourages us to have more. We are all born into this culture, and our actions and behaviours are related to the consumption behaviours of others (Cook, 2008). A child's room serves as a branded space. In this place, parents collect toys, clothes, furniture and food, all bearing brand names. This action is the first step in consumer socialisation for the child (McNeal, 2007, pp.40- 42).

Parents and educators need media literacy to help children develop a deeper understanding of the consumer socialisation process. The purpose of this study is to explore the content of television advertisements for toys and games released during the Christmas season in 2020 and 2021. We wanted to understand how these advertisements promote materialism. Based on the literature, we have identified four characteristics of materialism and transformed them into codes based on which we have analysed toy and game advertisements on the Romanian market.

2. Literature review

The circumstances analysed in this research consider three elements: play as a form of transmitting cultural values to children, in this case, those related to materialism; advertising as a form of shaping children's behaviour based on the values illustrated; games and toys promoted in advertisements as a way of incorporating the first two elements.

a) Play

Play can improve children's development in different areas: cognitive, emotional and physical. It also gives parents and teachers an excellent opportunity to connect with their children. Over time, there has been an evolution in society's perception of toys, and play has begun to be valued for its

role in early brain development. However, choosing the right play solution can be challenging due to the variety of offerings (Healey, 2019).

The increase in interest and sales of games and toys is due to social and economic factors: although birth rates have declined, parents are buying more and more expensive toys; the number of divorced or separated families has increased, and this often means more relatives buying toys; most women are giving birth late, which means higher incomes for such products (Kotler et al., 1999, pp.154- 155) Other factors identified are: both parents work, which means higher revenues for children; children have their funds at their disposal, and this makes them a target for marketing (Calvert & Wilson, 2008) (McNeal, 2007, pp.311- 313).

Because games and toys have an important role, the researchers also draw attention to elements that provoke debate and fear. The anxiety about toys takes two aspects into account: the value of leisure time and children's vulnerability. With regard to children's vulnerability, concerns mention the negative symbols that toys represent. Typically, these claims argue that toys contain unwanted values that children acquire through play. Toys convey values with cultural implications and encourage materialism (Best, 1998).

Culturally, the game is perceived differently from one culture to another, from one ethnic group to another or from one socio-economic group to another. For example, play can be seen as essential for children's cognitive and social development in many technologically developed Western countries, but it can be viewed as less significant in more traditionalist countries (Roopnarine, 2010).

Sutton-Smith (Sutton-Smith, 1997, pp.124- 135) reinforces the above claims. He believes that for a child play and imagination are important elements of socialisation through which they acquire values and ideals.

b) Values transmitted through advertising

Advertising does not create abstract images. It describes values that reflect consumers' dreams in a particular culture. In our society and culture, advertising can be a form of influence. It can influence understanding, viewpoints, emotions, choices, and actions, but the reality illustrated by advertising is not always genuine. In fact, it can be a distorted mirror in which only parts of our lives and values are portrayed (Pollay et al., 1990).

Media has a significant impact on consumers' lives. It creates preferences for certain types of food or clothing, as well as religious preferences or beliefs. Marketing can be described as a channel used to promote and endorse their products using advertising as a tool. Marketing is also significant in the process of socialisation of children. But media creates huge discrepancies between reality and desire, and marketers use it to promote desired ideas and values (Vandana & Lenka, 2014)

Consumer culture has a negative effect. It is supposed to offer freedom and power, but, in fact, it makes consumers buy frequently to establish their identity. Consumer's personal identity is often associated with material goods. In this context, material goods represent significant symbol for personal and social identity (Dittmar, 2007). When describing advertising to children, we talk about different ways of persuasion. The content is not factual or rational, it expresses emotions and affection. For a child, this content is persuasive (Nairn et al., 2007).

Desire plays an active role in creating and maintaining personal and social identity. Consumer culture increases desirability and perpetuates materialism. When consumers watch advertisements, they constantly compare what they have with what they want. Because this comparison is often negative, this leads to mental and physical discomfort. "While people believe they are expressing their selves and attaining happiness, they are, in fact, developing, monitoring, and molding their identities with respect to unrealistic ideals promoted by consumer culture through advertising." (Dittmar, 2007) Marketers should look for solutions for responsible campaigns that promote games and toys through the lens of children's psychological, emotional and cognitive development, and the best ones are those that allow free, unstructured play (Ginsburg, 2007).

c) Values from games and advertisements mirrored in society

Toys illustrate aspects of the adult world. They are symbols of roles, situations, objects or relationships in life and society. If toys and advertising content can represent symbols of human life, then children can use them to recreate values, rules, roles (Kline, 2017).

Bandura (Bandura, 2001) argues that children observe different behaviours and, if they find motivation, mirror them in their actions. Children observe, memorize information, encode it and find an appropriate representation. These processes lead to changes in behaviour, depending on how they are rewarded or punished.

Although technologies are changing rapidly, children's developmental needs, such as "friendship, identity, and emotional regulation, have remained constant" (Calvert, 2015, p.383). However, corporations accumulate huge profits from misdirecting children to seek identity and happiness through consumption (Hill, 2011)

Factors such as religion, politics, language and economics can produce differences in materialism tendencies between countries and cultures. These differences may be related to social and economic conditions. Another factor is associated with the fact that countries and populations are described and influenced by unique characteristics. Abib and El-Bassiouny (El-Bassiouny & Adib, 2012) constructed a model for studying materialism that describes several variables: materialism as a criterion variable, parents as a socializing agent, social interaction in the family; gender, education, religion and socio-economic status as variables of social structure and age.

A study in Denmark tried to find out what children want for Christmas and compared the results with brands advertised on TV. The study illustrated that 51.6% of children surveyed requested at least one brand advertised during the period investigated. These desires have several predictors: age and gender of the children, time spent watching TV on the channel that broadcasts most advertisements (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2000). Looking at the toys, the associated symbols and the distribution chain, we can understand the identities promoted and desired by children. We can predict identities related to race, ethnicity, status and gender (Reich et al., 2017).

3. Research methodology

The aim of this research is to identify the values represented by the marketing of children's games and toys as identified in TV advertisements for these products during the Christmas period.

Games, as we have already pointed out, are ways to help children discover and adapt to the world in which they live. Advertisements are ways for children to learn and discover the world they live in. The questions this research addresses are: What is the issue? How do children see themselves in advertisements? Are there references to materialism?

The objective of the analysis is as follow: Identify the illustration of materialism in the advertisements for games and toys broadcast on children's TV channels during the Christmas period in 2020 and 2021.

The technique used to identify, research and collect data is observation of game and toy advertisements broadcast on children's TV channels during the Christmas period from 1-23 December 2020 and 1-23 December 2021, and the instrument used is video recording sheet and observation sheet. The observation sheets mentioned: TV channel, day, time slot observed, brand and product promoted.

The method used is mixed inductive-deductive. Based on the selected sample of commercials will generalize the analysis to the entire category of TV commercials for children's games and toys on the Romanian market. Context is important it reflects only the commercials broadcast on children's TV channels and not the whole category of commercials.

a) Sampling

The advertisements analysed were those appearing on children's TV channels: Nickelodeon, Boomerang, Disney, Cartoon Network, Disney Junior, Minimax, Nick Jr. Ads for games and toys were observed on all of these channels for 90 minutes per day between December 1-23, 2020 and 2021. The period chosen was December, an relevant month for marketing games and toys. We observed 90 minutes per day to cover different programmes, those 90 minutes were chosen randomly, Monday to Friday from 12:00 to 21:00 and Saturday and Sunday from 10:00 to 22:00. We selected this method because the purpose of the research is to identify values in game and toy advertisements for as many products as possible, and not necessarily the frequency with which these advertisements appear. Choosing a single daily time slot could only illustrate the presence of certain ads specific to a certain age and content.

The technique used to process, analyse and interpret the data is content analysis: the language used in the advertisements, expressions, associations and explicit or implicit references to materialism: words, behaviours, emotions or contexts. We have detailed in the section about coding all the elements subject to the analysis and how it was done.

The process consisted of coding the texts and video images from the previously filmed advertisements into recording units. The establishment of these units was based on aspects identified in the literature, as described below.

b) Coding

Materialism is described in the literature by a few key elements that underpin consumer life. Richins and Dawson (Richins & Dawson, 1992) synthesise the research in this area and describe materialism in three characteristics: the level of need for possessions - material things considered essential to one's life; the level of happiness achieved by owning material things; success judged based on owning material things.

Belk (Belk, 1984) defines materialism as "the importance the consumer attaches to worldly possessions and the belief that these goods and services bring the greatest source of satisfaction or dissatisfaction in life". Easterlin and Crimmins (Easterlin & Crimmins, 1991) describe it as a pursuit of material well-being. In all three of the above perspectives, materialism has two elements: attachment to material things and the idea that these material things can provide happiness.

Oprea (Oprea, 2011) developed a scale of material values for children. It consists of three subscales: emphasis on material objects, material happiness and material success. (Oprea, 2011) suggests that for a materialistic child, some values are more important than others. He attaches more importance to material things or possessions, finds satisfaction in acquiring material things. He believes that a child with more possessions is more successful than one with fewer possessions.

Schor (Schor, 2004, pp.220- 236) in her research on children has developed a consumer involvement scale that includes three categories: dissatisfaction (rated in terms of how satisfied or dissatisfied the child is with the things he owns relative to other children or relative to what his parents can spend on him), consumer orientation (rated both in terms of the things he wants to buy and in terms of attachment to possessions ("I care about my games, my toys and other possessions.") and brand awareness.

The studies presented thus illustrate materialism as happiness associated with the possession of goods, in this case, the possession of games and toys, and the pursuit of this goal through the purchase of as many games and toys as possible (in the advertisements, this is encouraged through collectables), but also through the way the child sees himself in terms of the things he possesses, increasing self-esteem. In this analysis, we will add to these three elements another aspect, addressability. If it addresses the child, then the impact is higher. If it addresses the parents, then the game or toy should focus more on the benefits for the child's development. We have summarised the above aspects under the following codes:

Table no. 1 Materialism Codes

Code	Description
Addressability	The message of the advertisement is addressed to the child offering him/her stimuli that contribute to the desire to have the game/toy, or it is addressed to the parent and appeals to the tangible benefits of the product
The happiness associated with possession	Happiness associated with the possession of a game or a toy
Self-esteem	Whether or not product possession is associated with increased self-esteem
Collecting	Repeated purchase is encouraged by illustrating several products from the same set or collection.

Source: own processing

We used a mixed inductive-deductive methodology to correlate codes from the ideas and results of other studies with the ideas obtained by observing the present ads. Two of these codes: happiness associated with possession and self-esteem are directly related to results from other studies. Collecting is an indirect association related to a materialistic person wanting more things. In the process of selling toys, one way to increase possession is the idea of having all the toys in a particular collection or set. Adversity is that marketers want to promote these values directly to children. The child knows that the ad is aimed directly at them, so they want the product.

4. Findings

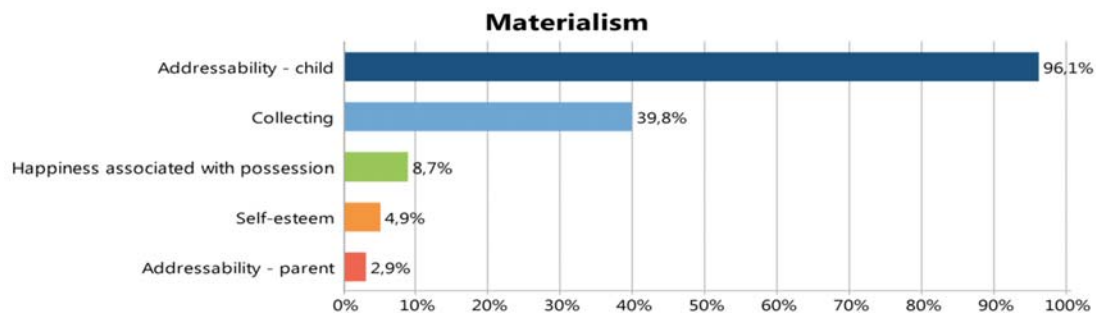
We observed seven TV channels from December 1-23, 2020 and 2021: Nickelodeon, Boomerang, Disney, Cartoon Network, Disney Junior, Minimax, Nick Jr. Observed content amounts to 2070 minutes of TV content, 1077 ads observed, 108 ads for various games and toys. We analysed these 108 commercials.

The content analysis concerns ads for children's games and toys. Children are late in acquiring the ability to abstractly and logically relate different aspects of reality and have difficulty understanding the advertising message (Valkenburg, 2017) (Schor, 2004) (Gunter, 2015). With this in mind, coding took the most explicit values as content units. We did not seek to interpret metaphors, interpretative aspects or ideas that are difficult for a child to understand.

The aim is to identify the illustration of materialism in the advertisements for games and toys broadcast on children's television channels during Christmas.

We have previously mentioned that materialism will be analysed in ads during this period based on four coding units: message addressability (the ad is directed to the child or parent), happiness associated with possession, self-esteem and collectability. The results of the analysis are highlighted in Figure 1.

Figure no. 1 Materialism Results 2020



Source: own processing

The first coded aspect was addressability. At this point, 91% of ads are addressed to the child, and only 2.8% of the ads are addressed to parents. Commercials addressed to parents belong to hypermarkets running promotional campaigns for games or toys during Christmas. A few advertisements 4.6% are too general to fit into one of these two categories. As mentioned above, the coding was simple. We want it to be self-explanatory, as for a child's understanding.

38% of the ads suggest repeated purchases or accumulating as many games and toys as possible by encouraging collecting: "discover new characters", "discover all sets", "discover all characters", "more variations", "sold separately", "each set sold separately", "new sets", "collect", "what a great collection", but also by explicitly illustrating several products in the same category in the ads. In some cases, multiple sets from the same collection were used together in the same ad with the words "each set sold separately". In this way, elaborate game scenarios have been created to suggest that the child needs several sets to complete the collection.

Table no. 2 Materialism results 2020

Code	Percentage	Expressions
Addressability child	96.10%	"Control it", "Are you sure?", "Show me", "Discover", "You can enlighten yourself", "If you feel like playing", "Which one will you choose?", "Be the first", "Let's see", "Take care of them"
Collecting	39.80%	"Discover the new characters", "Discover all the sets", "Discover all the characters", "Several variants", "Sold separately", "Each set is sold separately", "New sets", "Collect", "What a wonderful collection"
Happiness associated with possession	8.70%	"Wow! How many presents I received", "I'm so happy", "Now she's here to make you happy", "Always be happy", "favorite", "lifelong friend"
Self-esteem	4.90%	"No one surpasses us", "It's your style", "Grow up"
Addressability parent	2.90%	"family games", "The little ones enjoy both food and play"

Source: own processing

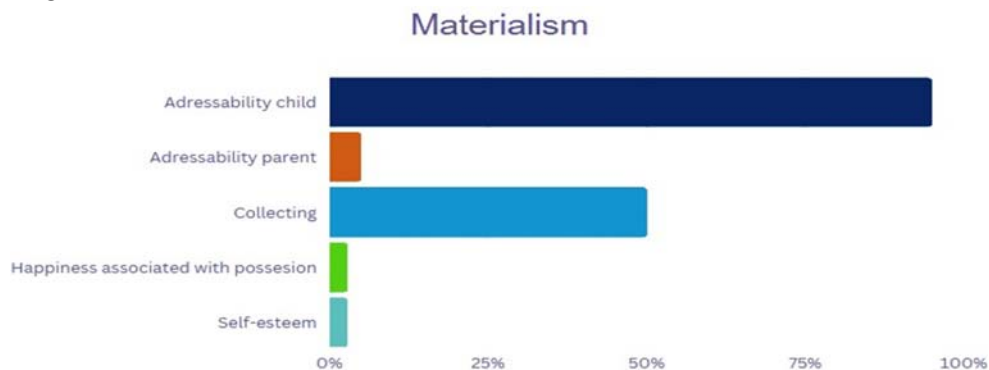
Happiness associated with possession is illustrated in 8.3% of ads. In this case, strictly happiness associated with possession was considered: "Wow! How many presents I got", "I'm so happy", "Now it's here to make you happy", "Always be happy". We also associated possession-related happiness by associating attachment to a particular toy that becomes a "favourite" or "lifelong friend". We considered these units in this code because they reflect a personification of toys and their transformation into objects of attachment for the child as presented in the literature.

Self-esteem appears in 4.6% of the advertisements, specifically for 5 products. In one coding unit, it was implied by illustrating several friends, one of whom owns the product and they all have a good time together, and in the others by explicit references to "no one beats us", "it's your style", and "grow up".

The analysis in 2021 is illustrated in the table below in Figure 2. In terms of addressability, 133 of the ads directly address the child, 95%: "She's waiting for you", "you can't help but love her", "come into the universe", "you'll fall in love", "enter the magical world", "create it your way", "find your way out", "get ready to sail", "watch her transform", "discover", "search", "you're ready to shine", "let's play", "turn on the music", "practice". Only 7 of the ads are aimed at parents. These adverts come from hypermarkets running promotional campaigns for games or toys during the Christmas period: "Still thinking about what present the little ones want from you to pass on to Santa?", "Children play and discover new things", and "Holidays are saved by the right price".

Fifty ads suggest repeated purchases or accumulating as many games and toys as possible by encouraging collecting: "lots to collect", "collect your princesses", "collect all the jewels", "discover them all", "sets sold separately", "collect the new collection", "multiple sets", "you can find hundreds of designs", "discover the whole collection", "additional sets sold separately", but also by explicitly illustrating in the ads several products in the same category.

Figure no. 2 Materialism Results 2021



Source: own processing

The happiness associated with possession is explicitly illustrated in 4 ads. Only the happiness associated with possession was taken into account: "to always be happy", "I'm so happy".

Table no. 3 Materialism results 2021

Code	Percentage	Expressions
Addressability child	- 95%	"She's waiting for you", "You can't help but love her", "Come into the universe", "You'll fall in love", "Enter the magic world", "Create it your way", "Find your way out", "Get ready to sail", "Watch it transform", "Discover", "Search", "You're ready to shine", "Let's play", "Turn on the music", "Practice"
Collecting	37.71%	"lots to collect", "Collect your princesses", "Collect all the gems", "Discover them all", "Sets sold separately", "Collect the new collection", "multiple sets", "You can find hundreds of designs", "Discover the whole collection", "Additional sets sold separately"
Addressability parent	- 5%	"Are you still thinking about what present the little ones want from you to pass on to Santa?", "Children play and discover new things", "Holidays are saved by the right price"
Happiness associated with possession	2.85%	"Always be happy", "I'm so happy"
Self-esteem	2.85%	"The secret of your charm", "Be cool and trendy", "Style to the max", "Be cool, be glam, be fancy"

Source: own processing

Self-esteem appears in 4 ads: "the secret of your charm", "be cool and fashionable", "style to the max", "be cool, be glam, be stylish".

In the methodology part, we pointed out that this content analysis can be extended to the whole market. In order to prove this claim, we need a wide analysis carried out on all marketing channels: social media, games, stores, etc. This content analysis is relevant, even if it refers to a small part of the marketing channels. Brands promoted on TV have the highest market share in Romania. The analysis included 108 ads in 2020 and 140 ads in 2021. The games and toys advertised belong to 12 manufacturers and distributors, 9 product brands and 3 hypermarkets. Two manufacturers and distributors run about 40% of the ads mentioned in the analysis.

5. Conclusions

In Romania, there are few studies on marketing to children, this field is regulated and aligned with European standards, but there is limited research in the matter. Romania is experiencing difficulties in family income, and the promotion of materialism and happiness associated with toy ownership creates discomfort and conflict in the family. Further analysis is needed to assess children's well-being in relation to the values promoted in society, including those portrayed through the marketing of toys and games.

Happiness is a value we constantly seek, but in a society subjected to large amount of data, economic change and mental and emotional problems, especially depression, happiness needs to be described in relation to others, not just in terms of possessions. The topic of Covid-19 pandemic was not reflected in advertising. The pandemic discomfort could be amplified by the desire for certain games and toys.

Qualitative research is subjective. This is the main reason why we have chosen codes that are as explicit as possible. We did not use semiotic, gestural or factual interpretations. We wanted to keep the values as practical as possible. There is a possibility that a small part of these coding units may differ in percentages for some values, but this will not affect the overall analysis and hierarchy.

The content analysed relates to one channel, TV commercials, but marketing has a wide range of promotional channels, of which the online environment is very relevant. This will be the subject of future research. In Romania, TV commercials are still widely used, and the logic of choosing this

channel starts from the costs of a campaign, if a company advertises on TV channels, then it has big budgets, then it has a significant market share on the Romanian market.

Another limitation is related to how a child feels these advertisements and the effects these values have on him. This aspect can also be part of a future analysis.

Efforts to investigate children's values in Romania need to be continued with further studies using different approaches. Interviews or other types of qualitative research can be carried out to investigate children's values and how advertisements for games and toys influence these values. Interviews with parents or educators can be conducted to assess how they relate to the content and values illustrated by the marketing of games and toys. Further content analysis can also be carried out in other channels, especially online and social channels. The analysed content should also be related to other actors in the Romanian toys and games market, actors that are not promoted on TV channels.

If we want to improve our understanding of marketing, of its role for children, and if we want to dissociate happiness from materialism, three strategies should be applied: regulating and limiting children's access to advertising, educating children in advertising marketing techniques, especially those related to persuasion, but also illustrating other forms that bring happiness in life: love, friendship, play (Opree et al., 2012). All these aspects can be integrated into a guide to media education and responsibility that will make marketing games and toys a responsible activity for the benefit of children and parents.

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