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Marketing and communication strategies aimed at children in the Italian food sector: a consumer learning perspective**Summary**

The purpose of this contribution is to debate the new trends in kids marketing focusing on the food sector. After an analysis of the relevant literature on children as consumers, a qualitative content analysis of the product lines (products, packaging and brand names) and the communication mix (commercials, websites and promotional activities) of a purposive sample of food brands revealed the main marketing and communication strategies aimed at children in the Italian market.

The analysis of the literature emphasized on the one hand the specific status of children as consumer learners, and on the other hand the nature of their consumer behaviour as dependent consumer behaviour. As a consequence, the analysis put in evidence that children may fall into the corporate strategy not as a single market, but as a plurality of markets, specifically as a primary, secondary, influence or future market. Furthermore, the study revealed that each market brings about specific marketing and communication strategies.

The main strategies emerged from the content analysis were: gatekeeping for children as a secondary market; gift in pack, trans-toying, advergaming, licensing, co-marketing, fantasy testimonials and miniaturization for children as a primary market; dual messaging and again gift in pack, trans-toying, advergaming, licensing, co-marketing, fantasy testimonials and miniaturization for children as an influence and future market.

The implications of these strategies on children's consumer learning processes are discussed in the final part of the paper.

Keywords

Consumer learning; children as a multidimensional market; marketing strategy; Italian food market.

Theoretical framework

Children as consumer learners

The investigation of the relationship between marketing and children can not disregard the specific status of children as consumers. Children, in fact, can not be considered as full-fledged consumers, but as a particular target group whose consumer role is still structuring. In other words, children are not consumers, but are *becoming* consumers.

How children become consumers represents the main concern of the theoretical and empirical framework known as "Consumer Socialization" (Carlson and Grossbart 1988; Moschis 1987; Roedder John 1999; Ward, Wackman and Wartella 1977) and of its enlargement in "Consumer Development" (Ironico 2008b, 2009; McNeal 1992, 1999, 2007; Valkenburg and Cantor 2001). The two paradigms share the vision that children learn their consumer role through interacting with the traditional agencies of socialization, i.e. family, peer, school and mass media. Consumer Development extends the standpoint of Consumer Socialization by adding to the agencies of socialization also environmental agents such as the products, their packagings, the consumer spaces where they are sold and the communication tools they are promoted through. Furthermore, Consumer Development investigates consumer learning processes by referring not only to the cognitive development of children, but also to their physical, motor, linguistic and relational development.

The main research area of Consumer Socialization and Consumer Development are related to the consumer learning process, to the agents of consumer learning and to the consumer learning outcomes. A review of the main contributions is given in table 1.

| <i>Area of research</i> | <i>Topics</i> | <i>Main contributions</i> |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Consumer learning processes | Theoretical models on how children become consumers | Ironico 2008b, 2009; Moschis and Churchill 1978; McNeal 2007; Ward, Wackman and Wartella 1977; Roedder John 1999; Valkenburg and Cantor 2001. |
| Agents of consumer learning | The role of the family | Carlson and Grossbart 1988; Carlson, Grossbart and Stuenkel 1992; Carruth and Skinner 2001; Cotte and Wood 2004; Grossbart, Carlson, Walsh 1991; Moschis 1985; Moschis 1987; Peters and Stewart 1981; Ward, Wackman and Wartella 1977. |
| | The role of the peer group | Anderson and Meyer 2000; Dotson and Hyatt 2005; Moschis 1987; Valkenburg and Cantor 2001. |
| | The role of the school | Brennan and Ritters 2003; Jette 2004; Mc Gregor 1999; Moschis 1987; Stampfl and Moschis 1978. |
| | The role of mass media | Englis, Solomon and Olofsson 1993; Moschis 1987; O'Guinn and Faber 1987; O'Guinn and Schrum 1997. |
| | The role of advertising | Lee 1997; Moore and Lutz 2000; Moschis 1987; Moschis and Mitchell 1986; Moschis and Moore 1982. |
| | The role of products | Ironico 2008b, 2009; Moore and Lutz 2000; McNeal 2007. |
| | The role of retail settings | Ironico 2008b; Moschis 1987. |
| Consumer learning outcomes | The development of advertising knowledge and attitudes | Brucks, Armstrong and Goldberg 1988; Butter, Popovich, Stackhouse and Garner 1981; Dickerson 2001; Dotson and Hyatt 2000. |
| | The development of product and brand knowledge | Bahn 1986; Belk, Bahn and Mayer 1982; Derscheid, Kwon and Fang 1996; Haynes, Burts , Dukes, Cloud 1993; Macklin 1996; Markman and Callahan 1983; McNeal 1992; Ward, Wackman and Wartella 1977. |

| <i>Area of research</i> | <i>Topics</i> | <i>Main contributions</i> |
|----------------------------|--|---|
| Consumer learning outcomes | Price knowledge | Berti and Bombi 1981, 1988; Fox and Kereth-Ward 1985; McNeal and McDaniel 1981; Stephens and Moore 1975. |
| | Money knowledge | Berti and Bombi 1981; Cohen and Xiao 1992; Cram 1999; Danziger 1958; Marshall 1964; Marshall and MacGrunder 1960; Strauss 1952. |
| | Retail store knowledge | Bellenger and Moschis 1982; Berti and Bombi 1980, 1988; McNeal 1969, 1992; McNeal and McDaniel 1981; Reece and Kinnear 1986. |
| | Shopping scripts | Peracchio 1992; Roedder John and Withney 1986; Reece and Kinnear 1986. |
| | Shopping skills | Carruth and Skinner 2001; Meyer and Anderson 2000; Moschis 1987; Ward, Wackman and Wartella 1977. |
| | Decision making skills | Atkin 1978; Davidson 1991; Gregan-Paxton, Roedder John 1995; Moschis and Moore 1979. |
| | Product evaluation and comparison skills | Moschis 1987; Roedder John 1999; Ward, Wackman and Wartella 1977; Wartella, Wackman, Ward, Shamir, Alexander 1979. |
| | Purchase influence skills | Böcker 1986; Caruana and Vassallo 2003; Ekstrom and Tansuhaj 1987; Gunter and Furnham 1998; Mangleburg 1990; Marquis 2004; Mauri 1996; McNeal 1992, Roedder John 1999; Williams and Burns 1998; Wilson and Wood 2004. |
| | Consumption motives and values | Achenreiner 1997; Carlson, Walsh 1994; Flouri 1999; Griffith 2003; McNeal 1969; Moore, Moschis 1981; Moore-Shay E.S., Berchmans 1996; Moschis 1985; Moschis, Churchill 1978,; Moschis, Moore 1982. |

Table 1: a review on the main contributions on how children become consumers.

Specifically, the contributions on the consumer learning processes have produced a series of theoretical models on how children become consumers. The studies on the agents of learning, instead, have investigated the role of the family, peer, school, mass media, advertising, products and retail settings on the consumer learning process. The researches on the learning outcomes, at last, have examined the development of advertising knowledge and attitudes, product and brand knowledge, retail store knowledge, price knowledge, money knowledge, shopping scripts, shopping skills, decision making skills, product evaluation and comparison skills, purchase influence skills and consumption motives and values.

The marketing implications of the particular status of children as consumer learners are discussed in the next paragraph.

Children as a multidimensional market

As James McNeal (2007) aptly illustrates, the specific status of children as consumer learners makes their consumer behaviour *dependent consumer* behaviour. At least till the age of eight – the moment in which, according to the author, children become *bona fide consumers* – in their pre-purchase, purchase and purchase behaviours children are actually dependent upon adults. Therefore, marketers look at children not as a single market, but a plurality of markets. More specifically, children may fall into the marketing strategy as a primary, secondary, influence and future market (McNeal 1992; Ironico 2008c). Furthermore, each market brings about specific marketing and communication strategies.

Children represent a primary market when they have acquired the basic knowledge and skills to autonomously conduct a purchase act: how to use money, how to behave in the stores, the role of the sale personnel, product and brand names. The understanding of money and the purchase act does not normally occur before the age of seven, when children start handling with their first independent purchase experiences (McNeal 2007; Valkenburg and Cantor 2001). It must be emphasized that the sector that mainly involves children as a primary market is the food one. In most cases, actually, the first independent shopping experiences occur when parents send children to neighbourhood stores for simple purchase tasks such the “bread and milk runs” (McNeal 1969; Griffith 2003). More generally, these experiences include short trips aimed at the purchase of inexpensive toys or a wide array of snacks such ice creams, sweets and chips.

Before becoming a primary market, children mainly represent a secondary market. A secondary market may be defined as a market where the purchase processes are entirely conducted by different subjects from the users of the products. A typical secondary market is the newborn market. In this case, the users of the products do have specific consumer needs, but they do not possess the cognitive and motor skills (locomotion, language, etc.) to autonomously fulfil them (McNeal 2007). A part from early childhood, children continue to be a secondary market for all the products in whose buying processes are not involved (clothes, food, travelling, body care, etc.).

However, starting from the age of two or three, the consumer choices in which children are excluded are quite limited. Even though children do not possess the basic knowledge and skills to autonomously conduct a purchase act, they are actually able to influence it. This way, it is possible to define childhood as an influence market. In other words, children represent an influence market when they can exert an influence on the purchases of the family by expressing their needs and asserting their preferences.

The notion of future market, finally, is not related to the different roles children may play in the purchase process (decision-maker, buyer, user, influencer), but to the strategic orientation of the corporations. Specifically, children represent a future market when the companies invest into long-term activities aimed at encouraging the brand loyalty of children as the consumers of tomorrow in a *lifetime relationship marketing* view.

As mentioned before, each market is associated to specific corporate strategies. Considering children as a secondary market basically means focusing on parents. Therefore, the products – in terms of quality, price, brand attractiveness, prestige, fashionableness, etc. – the places they are sold in and the ways they are promoted through will be aimed at adults (on this point, see Ironico 2008c). On the contrary, considering children as a primary market fundamentally means establishing a relationship directly with children, sharing their expressive codes, their imaginary and, more generally, their culture (Cook 2003; Ironico 2008a). Finally, considering children as an influence or a future market means simultaneously communicating with parents and children, interconnecting relevant value areas for both actors.

Research objectives and method

The purpose of this article is to investigate the marketing and communication strategies aimed at children in the Italian food sector in a consumer learning perspective. To this end, I conducted an analysis of the relevant literature on the corporation's marketing and

communication strategies aimed at children as a primary, secondary, influence and future market.

Furthermore, I carried out a qualitative content analysis of the product lines and the communication mix of a non probabilistic sample of food brands sold in the Italian market. The brands included in the study were chosen through a purposive sampling procedure. Specifically, I selected baby food, breakfast food, snacks, sweets, ice creams, main courses and deep-frozen food brands. A list of the brands included in the sample is given in table 2.

| Sector | Brands |
|-------------------------|---|
| Baby food | Mellin, Mio, Plasmon. |
| Breakfast food | Cheerios, Chocapic, Danone, Kellog's, Kinder, Mulino Bianco, Nesquik. |
| Snacks | Kinder, Nestlé, Salati Preziosi, Nesquik. |
| Sweets | Dolci Preziosi, Kinder, Mulino Bianco, Nesquik. |
| Ice creams | Algida, Nestlé Motta, Nesquik. |
| Main courses | Barilla, Buitoni. |
| <i>Deep-frozen food</i> | Buitoni, McCain, Rovagnati. |

Table 2: the food brands included in the sample.

In regard to the product lines, the objects of investigation were brand names, the characteristics of the products (shape, size, colours, flavour) and their packagings. In regard to the marketing and communication activities, the objects of investigation were commercials, websites and promotional activities.

The product lines and the marketing and communication activities were analyzed according to Grounded Theory's principles (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), by recodifying the gathered information in a series of emergent categories able to emphasize the marketing and communication strategies aimed at children as a primary, secondary, influence and future market.

The findings of the study

Marketing and communication strategies aimed at children as a secondary market

As stated before, a secondary market par excellence is the newborn and early childhood market. Children, in fact, start showing their consumer preferences and exerting their

influence on the purchases of the family around the age of two. As from this period, the development of the language and locomotion enables children to communicate adults the products they are interested in, by naming them or by autonomously pick up them from the shelves at home and in the stores (McNeal 2007).

Nevertheless, childhood may continue being a secondary market also for long, sometimes as late as adolescence. This choice is frequent for two motivations: first, mothers often prefer shopping alone, avoiding to be diverted by the necessity to look after their children or to contend with their continuous buying requests; secondly, several corporations, despite the awareness of children's influence, prefer to aim their marketing and communication strategies at parents, since they recognise their purchasing power and hence the authority to have the last word on consumer choices (Ironico 2008c).

The dominant model of communication for the corporations that consider children a secondary market is the so-called "gatekeeping" (Schor 2004). These companies are aware that adults filter the consumer experiences of the youngsters by exerting a mediation function that privileges products and messages consistent with the role of a reliable and skilful parent. Accordingly, the marketing and communication activities of these corporations typically refer to dimensions such as quality, safeness and education. In the food market, specifically, such dimensions imply nutritional quality, naturalness and healthiness.

Baby food websites, as those of Plasmon, Mio and Mellin, are characterized by the presence of useful advices for neo-mothers. In addition, they often feature a scientific language, with a particular attention for the nutritional information and, more generally, for the appropriate development of the child. Interactive interfaces where mothers can talk with paediatrics and child development experts are very common too.

Marketing and communication strategies aimed at children as a primary market

The main goal of the corporations that consider children as a primary market is to establish a relationship with them, sharing their codes of communication and more generally their culture. To this end, these companies typically try to increase the so-called "play value" (Rust 1993) of products and communication tools. The most simple way to playfully connote a product consists in adding a game to it, through the well-known "gift in pack" strategy. Gift in pack is the at the heart of the success of Kinder Sorpresa chocolate eggs and of its competitor Dolci Preziosi. Furthermore, gift in pack is used by other sweets and snacks brands as Mulino Bianco or Salati Preziosi chips.

A more sophisticated strategy is “trans-toying” (Schor 2004; Ironico 2008a). Trans-toying consists in transforming common objects into objects children can play with. In the food sector, products shaped on geometrical forms, alphabet letters, animals or fanciful characters are very frequent. McCain’s Kid Smiley potatoes croquettes, for instance, have the shape of a little smiley face, Kinder’s Happy Hippo chocolate bars are shaped like an hippopotamus, Algida’s Shoot Ice ice-cream has the shape of a target, Nestlé Motta’s Hello Kitty ice cream is shaped like the head of the homonymous kitten.

Communication tools can be playfully connoted by the trans-toying strategy too. Some Mulino Bianco snack’s packagings, for instance, can be cut and turned into table games. On the web, trans-toying takes the form of “advergaming”, where products, packagings and brands are included into videogames. In the kids section of Algida website, for example, there is a videogame for every kind of ice-cream: hence, children can have fun scoring the Shoot Ice hit, coping with the Smile Gum labyrinth or surfing picking up the Surfing Board ice creams. Otherwise, in Chocapic website, children can plunge into the abyss or take a ride on a roller coaster and play picking up Chocapic petals and packagings.

Another way to be tuned with children’s culture consists in using popular icons and characters. This strategy is at the hearth of the brand Dolci & Salati Preziosi, that offers potato chips, chocolate eggs and other snacks featuring cartoon and comic characters such as Spiderman, Hamtaro, Hello Kitty or Pockémon. These characters appear on the products’ packagings and are used in synergy with other communication strategies: they can be the gadget of a gift in pack initiative; they can mould the shape of the products in tune with a trans-toying strategy; they can assume a virtual form and feature inside videos or advergaming in the web. The use of popular icons and characters can be regulated by licensing agreements – this is the case of Dolci & Salati Preziosi and Nestlé – or co-marketing initiatives. In the last case, the use of the character is associated to promotional activities, competitions or advertising campaigns, as in the case of 2008 Kinder Sorpresa commercial with the Shrek movie characters.

Instead of using an existent character, other brands – like Kellog’s, Danito or Mulino Bianco – prefer to create a new one through the “fantasy testimonial” strategy. In a similar way to licensing characters, fantasy testimonials are very flexible, as they can assume different forms and can be reproduced on several supports: from a simple two-dimensional figure – a print on the products’ packagings or a cartoon inside a promotional clip – to a three-dimensional object associated to trans-toying or gift in pack strategies.

A last strategy emerged by the analysis of the product lines is what has been labelled as “miniaturization”. Children’s product, in fact, are often child-sized. Miniaturization may be

present not only at the product level, but also at the brand name level. Many Barilla and Mulino Bianco children's products, for instance, are characterized by the use of diminutives: Piccolini, Saccottino, Tegolino, Crostatina. Diminutives are also used by Findus for Sofficini, Buitoni for Pensierini and Rovagnati for Panatine. In other cases, suffixes like "Mini" or "Baby" stand next to the brand name, such as Rovagnati's Teneroni Baby.

Marketing and communication strategies aimed at children as an influence and future market

The strategies discussed in the previous paragraph emerged for the corporations that consider children as an influence or a future market as well. In these cases too, it is important to establish a dialog with children by sharing their culture and their expressive codes.

However, aiming at children as an influence or a future market also implies considering parents. Albeit with different roles, the buying processes for food may involve both parents and children. In particular, children generally perform the role of users and influencers, while parents typically perform the role of buyers and decision-makers. Therefore, the corporations that consider children as an influence or a future market may choose to simultaneously communicate with adults and children.

Such a strategy has been labelled by Juliet Schor (2004) as "dual messaging". Dual messaging can be distinguished by the intersection of relevant value areas for both children and parents: play, fantasy, fun and more generally children's culture on the one hand, quality, wealth, safety and naturalness on the other.

As the author explains, dual messaging may assume the form of "dual campaigns", namely the parallel diffusion of different campaigns – sometimes through different media – respectively addressed to parents and children. In other cases, dual messaging may be implemented in the same campaign. Several Mulino Bianco's commercials represent a clear example of this last orientation. Relevant attributes for parents, such as naturalness and genuineness, are actually narrated with a language in tune with children's culture, that reappropriates the communication codes of the fairy-tale and makes a large use of fantasy testimonials and licensing characters.

The characteristics of each market and the related marketing and communication strategies are summed up in Table 3.

| Children as... | Characteristics | Typical age groups | Target of the marketing strategy | Marketing and communication strategies |
|-----------------------|---|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Primary market | Children have acquired the basic knowledge and skills to autonomously conduct a purchase act. | School children | Children | Gift in pack, trans-toying, advergaming, licensing, co-marketing, fantasy testimonials, miniaturization. |
| Secondary market | Children are dependent upon adults since they do not possess the cognitive and motor skills to autonomously fulfil their consumer needs or the basic knowledge and skills to autonomously conduct a purchase act. | Newborns; preschool children | Parents | Gatekeeping. |
| Influence market | Even though children do not possess the basic knowledge and skills to autonomously conduct a purchase act, they are able to influence the consumer choices of the family by expressing their needs and asserting their preferences. | Preschool and school children | Children and parents | Gift in pack, trans-toying, advergaming, licensing, co-marketing, fantasy testimonials, miniaturization, dual messaging. |
| Future market | Corporations invest into long-term activities aimed at encouraging the brand loyalty of children as the consumers of tomorrow in a lifetime relationship marketing view. | Preschool and school children | Children and parents | Gift in pack, trans-toying, advergaming, licensing, co-marketing, fantasy testimonials, miniaturization, dual messaging. |

Table 2: the characteristics of primary, secondary, influence and future market and the related marketing strategies.

Concluding remarks

Aiming directly at children, the strategic orientations that have a greater impact on consumer learning processes are those that consider children as a primary, influence or future market. Specifically, most of the discussed marketing and communications initiatives refer to play, through techniques such as in gift pack, trans-toying and advergaming.

It may be argued that play represents the primary way through which children approach consumption. According to Jean Piaget (1923), play actually enables children to explore the world assimilating the new experiences in a way that is suitable to the specific stage of development they find themselves. In particular, the corporations can use play to represent the world of products and brands, facilitating children in learning their distinctive features such as packagings, company logos, brand names, letterings and chromatic codes.

A clear example of this practice is the advergaming strategy, that encourage children to play with products, packagings and company logos, facilitating the learning of product attributes, chromatic codes and other elements of the visual identities of brands. Another way that allows children to easily approach specific products and brands through play is trans-toying, which also encourages children in developing preferences and attitudes for specific products and brands.

The marketing and communications strategies that do not explicitly evoke play may affect consumer learning processes as well. In particular, fantasy testimonials encourage children in creating a fantasy world around the character, a world that children will later identify with the brand's one. In addition, the playful interaction with the testimonial facilitate children in learning the brand name – that almost always corresponds with the character's one – and the several features of the visual identity of the brand. The use of licensing characters and miniaturization, on the other hand, may stimulate the children's interest for specific products, contributing to the development of brand attitudes and preferences.

However, as Susan Linn (2004) aptly argues, the use of licensing characters may also contribute to create materialistic values in children, promoting an uncontrolled desire of possession for all those products connected to the character. It is important to emphasize that the specific implications for the food market may be even more serious, since an uncontrolled desire for food can result in an increase in children obesity and eating disorders.

To conclude, it can be argued that the analyzed brands operating in the Italian food market affect children's learning processes through the reference to play and, more generally, through the sharing of children's culture and codes of communication. The effects of their marketing

strategies, however, are not limited to the creation of brand and product knowledge, attitudes and preference, but can also lead to the development of materialistic values and an increase in children obesity and eating disorders.

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