

“Can I Have This Superhero Milk?” Investigating the Role of Packaging in Persuading Children

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Abstract

Child consumers form a very important segment for marketers due to several reasons. However, since children have an easily manipulative nature, they are considered to be vulnerable and special regulations apply when marketing practices are targeted directly towards children. Because of the tight restrictions, marketers tend to attract children with different techniques, one of which is product packaging. In this study, as the first step of analysis, packaging practices in flavored milk products for children are observed. In the second stage, the effect of packaging in the preferences of children is examined by conducting short structured interviews with 34 children. The results show that, children are highly influenced by the appearance of the packages and super hero or princess characters are admired most. The respondent children state that “they feel like they are a part of the adventure” by selecting the packages with those characters, therefore tend to change their preferences accordingly.

Keywords: Packaging, vulnerable customers, children

1. Introduction

In the commonly used definition of marketing, first step is identification of customers’ needs and wants and then in the second step they are tried to be satisfied. However, there is a debate that this definition is developed for “normal” and “ordinary” customers, who are able to define their need and wants in a clear way and able to distinguish between alternatives. Whereas, for special groups, called as vulnerable consumers, more attention and detailed analysis should be made.

In this study, the concept of vulnerability in consumer context will be discussed and children will be analyzed as a special group in vulnerable customers. After that, the role of packaging as a persuasive tool in marketing will be reviewed and packaging practices made towards children in milk packages will be analyzed to see the role of packaging in persuading children. After content analysis and interviews with a group of children, the results will be discussed.

2. Customer Vulnerability

According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word “vulnerable” means “easily hurt or harmed physically, mentally, or emotionally” (www.merriam-webster.com). In the scope of marketing, this term is somewhat toned down and does not include physical hurting. Rather, in marketing, customer vulnerability is faced when the customer is susceptible to a detriment in consumption. The circumstance of vulnerability might lead to a wide range of negative consequences, which include financial detriment (due to being unable to access the best deals), tendency to become isolated (leading to a psychological hurting) or not being able to participate in society as much as they wish (leading to a sociological and emotional hurting) (ofcom.org). In other words, in the scope of marketing, the vulnerability of customers may result in a harm in one's welfare or interests (Brenkert, 1998).

Consumers may also be considered as vulnerable, if they are exposed to a greater loss of welfare than other consumers as a result of buying inappropriate products for themselves, or on the opposite, if they fail to buy a product even though it would have been better to have bought it (Burden 1998).

Vulnerability is said to be a circumstantial state, and it is subject to change over time. Yet, the underlying reasons should be identified. In the literature, several factors are specified about customer vulnerability. Some studies suggest that it arises from the interaction of market and product characteristics, whereas another stream of studies point personal attributes and circumstances as the main source (Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg 2005). For example, according to Ringold (1995), “diminished capacity to understand the role of advertising, product effects or both” directly affects vulnerability. This means that, due to their personal characteristics, such as age, race, psychological and cognitive situation and sometimes gender, which all might act as a disadvantage to them (Brenkert 1998), might lead them not to get their “full consumer dollar, or to confront an imbalance in the marketplace”(Morgan and Riordan 1983).

On the other hand, a variety of external conditions, such as the product characteristics or market conditions also affect the level of vulnerability for the customers. Among the market factors, information asymmetry, market power, exploitative supplier motivations and complex products or transactions can be listed. In order to be able to visualize it more easily, how resources of healthcare or education is distributed across society (Franzak et.al.1995) or lack of access to retail facilities (Baker and Kaufman-Scarborough 2001) and lack

of access to quality and affordable products (Hill, 2001) might be stated as external factors affecting vulnerability. Moreover, inconvenient design of retail stores for people with physical disabilities is very frequently seen and leads to vulnerability (Kaufman-Scarborough, 2001). Such factors also contribute to vulnerability of customers, because they cannot move and wander around the retailer shop as they wish to.

According to Baker, et.al. (2005), general economic conditions such as depression may also affect the level of vulnerability of the consumers. For example, research shows that agricultural production and distribution is disrupted in war-torn countries (Shultz, 1997). Moreover, children who witness or experience violence also turn out to be vulnerable consumers when they grow up because of the psychology they are pushed in. Brenkert (1998) identifies people with such kind of vulnerability as “socially vulnerable” people, since their social situation renders them significantly less able than others.

Generally speaking, any factor leading to poor or ineffective use of information by the customers creates vulnerability in the customers. Among these factors, intellectual disability, illiteracy, limited language proficiency, low critical assessment capacity and information asymmetry are the major factors that cause detriment for the customer. Based on this argument, Burden (1998) identifies elder people, children, unemployed people, people with longstanding and limiting illness, low-income households, ethnic minorities and people with no formal educational qualifications as vulnerable consumer groups. Among these groups, this study focuses on vulnerability of children.

3. Children as Customers and Vulnerability of Children

Children’s evolution in turning into a real consumer is observed to have 5 stages (McNeal, 1993). The first stage is infancy, the ages between 0-2, where the child sees different products and packages with different colors and shapes, but usually he is only an observant at this stage.

In the second stage, between ages 2-3.5, the child starts to point specific products with his finger while his parents are shopping and in the late periods of this stage he requests for specific products at home. This behavior signals that product or brand identification has started. Between 3.5- 5.5 the child is able to distinguish between different brands and also able to show his own preference towards a specific brand. Eventually, when the child starts to school, around the age 5.5 - 8, he knows that in order to buy something, the customer should pay money in return. Therefore, at this period, children start to experience the freedom of spending money themselves with the supervision of their parents. The final stage of a child’s socialization as a consumer starts at around age 8, where he is able to shop without the help of his parents. Therefore, one might suggest that acceptance of a child as a real consumer occurs after the age of 8. However, companies target much younger children in their marketing activities to make sure that they are captured by the brand. Considering the fact that children under seven years of age are easily manipulated and are accepted to be the most vulnerable group to advertising (Marshall, 2003), special regulations are made when marketing directly to children.

On the other hand, both producers and marketers are very much interested in children due to some reasons (Loudon ve Della Bitta, 1988). The first reason is their volume in the general demographics. According to World Bank data of 2014, 26% of the World population consists of children under the age of 15 (kff.org, 2015). In Turkey, the total amount of children under the age of 15 is around 20 million as of 2015 and this number composes about 28% of the total Turkish population (Tuik, 2016). In addition to this, it is observed that the child segment of population continues to grow at a growing pace each year. This huge number also shows the potential of consumption in the market and increases many companies’ appetite for profit in this sector. Therefore many companies are searching ways to reach to that young market and have a part of that consumption chance. According to Turkish Statistical Institute (Tuik, 2015), an average household spends majority of his income to food products. Therefore, many firms are playing hard to get a share in the minds and wallets of the consumers - especially in the young customer’s probable consumption areas. Research shows that, while the child-focused market used to be limited on toys and junk foods, now it includes clothes, shoes, cosmetics and electronic products (Beder, 1998).

Secondly, with the new child raising approach and ease in money spending, children are now able to spend the money they personally have. In the US, children under age 12 are reported to spend more than \$11 billion of their own money (McGee and Heubusch, 1997). Consequently, they are accepted to be a market of their own.

Furthermore, according to research, today’s children develop brand awareness and loyalty at early stages of childhood (Ross and Harradine, 2004), which makes them accountable as future customers. Gunter and Furnham (1998) identified this phenomenon in their research and proposed that the sooner the children are used to purchasing a brand, the more loyal they will be in their life as adults. Also, marketers show tendency to concentrate on children, because of their spending potential when they grow up. It is found that most brand preference decisions are stemmed in the childhood or adolescence periods at latest. Therefore, marketers aim children from their early childhood and recognize them as separate and important consumers as their own. (Lindstrom and Seybold, 2004)

Last but not least, due to the new family dynamics, children of today have more power on the general consumption of the family and act as important influencers in family's consumption. Moreover, they have even power not only in daily household purchases, but also in their parents' personal consumption or in making big decisions such as buying a new car or a house as well (Valkenburg and Cantor, 2001). Because of these reasons, children and teenagers are accepted to compose a very important consumer group from many perspectives.

In the classical theory of consumer behavior, a consumer is characterized as having wants and preferences, being able to search the alternatives, choose between the alternatives and make the purchase and finally evaluate the decision (Valkenburg and Cantor, 2001). From this perspective, considering the cognitive abilities of children and their analytical thinking capacity, children cannot be thought as regular or normal consumers. Accordingly, most researchers in the literature (e.g. Brenkert 1998, Cartwright 2011, Baker, et.al. 2005, Sener and Babaogul 2007) have identified children as being vulnerable due to the reasons stated above. Therefore, they are treated as a vulnerable group from marketing perspective and special regulations apply while targeting to them. At this point, packaging practices are commonly used to be able reach to afore mentioned group of consumers.

4. Packaging as a Promotion Tool

For many years, there has been a debate on ethical issues concerning advertising targeted to children. According to opponents of advertising to children, it is argued that children younger than 8 years old have limited cognitive abilities and they tend to believe on what they see on advertisements (Elden and Ulukök, 2006). Therefore they are very easily manipulative. Moreover, it is proved by the research of academicians that children who are exposed to advertising and other marketing communication through mass media are known to grow a tendency towards an increased materialism (Greenberg and Brand, 1993; Liebert, 1986). It is also suggested that as people end up as materialistic individuals, social values will erode which will result in a corruption in the society in the long term. On the contrary, in order to be able to satisfy the needs and wants of the child consumer segment, marketers are still required to reach to child consumer segment, however, without using mass communication techniques (Greenberg and Brand 1993, Calvert, 2008). This is the point where packaging stars especially in targeting that special consumer segment.

Packaging is simply defined as "processes or materials employed to contain, handle, protect and transport an article" (businessdictionary.com). However, now the role of packaging is broadening with some intangible functions, such as image building. Therefore it is gaining much more importance from marketing perspective.

In the literature of marketing, packaging has initially been identified as a tool in promotion, however now with the self-service retail formats; it is called as another stand-alone "P" of marketing, like product, price, promotion and place. The importance of packaging arises because, as proposed by Pilditch (1961), "they act like a silent salesman on the shelf". They communicate with the consumers and create awareness in communication and branding. Therefore, they might be called as value creators for a product. Accordingly, Bassin (1988) identified five key areas in packaging, creating further value for consumers. These areas are brand identification, advertisement at the point-of-sale, transportation, storage and providing task assistance at home through labeling and instructions. Including all of these, packaging of a product should always aim to increase the perceived value of the product.

Packaging is also accepted to be a crucial element for the presentation of a product. Teke (2014) suggests that packaging acts like a dress of a product and no matter how great the product is, an accurate alluring dress should accompany it. According to Sonsino (1990), package design variables consist of some components, which are color, typography, pictures, shape, size, and material. All of these components have a distinct role in value creation. For example, the shape of the package creates an image about the product and the brand (Sauvage, 1996) and the material of a package affects consumer thought process. Moreover, it is also identified that typography is important for readability and preferences. In addition to these, Underwood et al. (2001) suggested that pictures on packages increased learning and have much more importance for consumers who are unable to read- such as children.

5. Investigation of Milk Packages as Persuasive Agents Towards Children

According to discussions made above, in this study packages of flavored milk which are targeted towards children are investigated. Total drinking milk production in Turkey is around 106 000 tons in the first 10 months of 2015 according to the Turkish Statistical Institute (2016), with an increase of 9.1% with respect to last year. Moreover, Ipsos has conducted a research on milk industry and the results of that research indicated that, in the Turkish market, flavored milk accounts for 13% share of the packaged milk market on tonnage basis (brandtalks.org, 2013).

In the analysis part, all of the widely available flavored milk brands are obtained and their packages are photographed. They are then analyzed on the basis of used fonts, colors and illustrations to see if the

packages of these products are designed especially for the attention of the children. Afterwards, the general themes that are used in the packages are clustered to see if there exists a general scheme and trend for the attention children or not. Finally, in the third phase of the study, a group of pre-school kids are interviewed by showing the packages of the milk brands, asked about their attitudes towards those packages. Finally, all of the milk packages are shown and offered to children to see the actual preferences and the reasons for the preference are discussed.

5.1. Identification of Sample Milk Brands

According to Euromonitor International database (euromonitor.com, 2015), 7 brands in the Turkish packaged milk sector constitute more than 70% market share. The market shares of these brands are as seen in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Market shares of packaged milk brands in Turkey

Brand Name	Market Share (%)
Dost Süt	19.3
Pınar Süt	17.62
Sütaş	11.3
Sek Süt	8.3
İçim Süt	6.7
Nestle	4.2
Danone	3.4

In order to satisfy the aim of the study, the packages of flavored milk products are investigated. In designing the empirical part, firstly, all packaged drinkable milk products in Turkey are listed from the website of “Association of Packaged Milk and Milk Products Industrials” (asuder.org, 2015). Then, local firm’s products are eliminated from the list. The remaining firms were further screened on the basis of whether they hold any products targeted to children or not. After this second screening, a total of 14 brands were left, which made the sample of the study. As long as the market shares of these brands are considered, by examining these 14 brands, about 80% of the market will be covered and the findings might be generalized to all packaged drinkable milk products in Turkey.

5.2 Examination of Selected Milk Brands with Respect to Their Packages

In this study, packages of 14 different flavored milk brands are observed. The observation is based on content analysis and it mainly consists of the color used, the font characteristics and the illustration used on the package.

On all of the milk packages observed, it is seen that the dominant color of the package changes according to the flavor of the milk. In all of the observed brands, there are only three flavors offered: strawberry, banana or chocolate. If the milk is strawberry flavored, the dominant color of the package is pink, if the flavor is banana, the dominant color is yellow and if the flavor is chocolate, the dominant color of the package is brown.

Secondly, the typography, which write “milk” on the packages, is examined. It is seen that, different font types are used on the flavored and plain milk packages of the same brand. Generally, since the flavored milks are targeted towards children, the font characteristics are more childish and joyful, where on the contrary; the plain milk packages carry normal fonts, as in brand’s other products, with no specific characteristic.

As a third fact, the figures on the packages are observed. On 5 of the 14 brands, it is seen that cow illustrations are used. On 4 of the 14 brands, sympathetic other animal illustrations are used, such as a squirrel, teddy bear, etc. Finally, in the remaining 6 brands, it is seen that licensed figures are used. The figures are either characters of popular movies or popular animations movies. Iron Man and Spider Man, Minions, Lightning McQueen from Cars, characters from Ice Age of Angry Birds, Barbie, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Tinkerbelle and such are used to get the attention of children.

In analyzing the themes used in the figures on the packages, four distinct themes are identified: First theme is *sportsmanship*, which focuses on sporting figures. In 4 of the examined packages, this theme is identified. Second theme is on *fun and entertainment* and 4 of the packages are identified as using the fun theme. The remaining two themes are *power*, as used in packages of 3 brands, and finally the last theme is *characters* of popular movies or video games. Generally unisex characters are selected to be suitable for both boys and girls (such as Angry Birds, Ice Age or Minions), however, gender segmentation is also observed. For example, some brands use princess or fairy images, such as Tinkerbelle or Frozen characters to target girls, whereas boys are targeted with Spiderman, Iron Man or Lightning McQueen images.

5.3 Interviews with preschoolers

In order to understand how the packages affect preference of small children, short semi-structured interviews are arranged with 34 preschool kids, with age group 3-6 in November 2015 in a private kindergarten in Ankara,

Turkey. The respondent kids were selected on convenience basis and before talking to them, permissions are granted from their families. Of the 34 children, 14 is female and 20 is male. The age distribution is 4 from 3-age group, 12 from 4-age and 18 from 5-6 year group. In order to minimize the interaction between children, they were interviewed individually. Finally, considering the concentration durations of these age group, only a few questions are asked within a total duration of 15 minutes per child.

During the interview, in the first part, they were asked whether they prefer to drink flavored milk or plain milk, which type of flavor they prefer and which type of milk (plain or flavored) they generally/normally drink. In the second part of the interview, all of the above mentioned brands in all flavors as well as plain milk were showed to children and asked them to select one.

According to their answers, 15 of the children said they preferred plain milk instead of flavored milk. However, 26 of the children said they regularly drink plain milk because their mothers do not let them to drink flavored milk. In talking about flavored milk, 18 of the children said they preferred to drink chocolate flavored milk, 8 of them said they liked strawberry flavored and 3 said that they preferred banana flavored milk. Even though 15 children previously said they preferred plain milk, when talking about flavors, only 5 of them restated their preference in plain milk, whereas others eagerly talked about flavored milk. It is seen that the favorite flavor is chocolate and favorite figure or theme on the package is popular movie or game characters.

The answers given by children are summarized in Table 2:

Table 2. Answers given by respondent children

	Choice	Frequency
Type of milk preferred	Plain	15
	Flavored	24
Type of milk children normally drink	Plain	26
	Flavored	8
Type of milk selected after showing the packages	Plain	3
	Flavored	31
Preferred flavor	Chocolate	18
	Strawberry	8
	Banana	3
Theme preferred	Sportsmanship	8
	Fun and entertainment	2
	Power	3
	Characters	21

Observation of children's behavior also revealed that the characters which are thought to be unisex are only preferred by boys and on the contrary, girls selected only either princess themed packages or sportsmanship packages. Moreover, the children who said to prefer plain milk selected a flavored milk to drink when the packages are shown. When they are asked about the reason of switching, one of the children showed the character on the package and said "There's Iron Man power in this package. If I drink it, I will be like Iron Man". There were similar reactions in most of the children, especially about the super hero theme.

Discussions about the findings are made in the following section.

6. Results and Discussion

Vulnerability in the scope of marketing is about having a potential to get harmed from marketing practices. The harm might be financial, emotional or sociological, which in the end results in a harm in one's welfare. Fortunately, vulnerability is dependent on people's circumstances and might change or diminish over time.

Children, due to their limited cognitive abilities, easily manipulative nature and inability to distinguish between persuasive marketing practices and real product attributes, are accepted as vulnerable consumer groups. For these reasons, marketing to children should be carefully controlled. However, due to the size of the children market, and their importance as future customers, marketers cannot afford to ignore children or not making any activity for attracting them. At this point, product packaging seems to be one of the most important factors by acting as the silent salesman and communicating with children.

Packaging elements play a very crucial role especially for products which are targeted towards children. As this study also proves, children make their choices mostly based on the package properties. Consequently, one might conclude that for children, the first brand preference depends not on the product attributes, but on the packaging. This is parallel with what the children said during the interview, when they were offered flavored milk packages and asked to select one of them. As stated in the previous section, most of the children selected packages with character pictures printed. They told the reason why they have selected them is

because they “feel like they are a part of the story”, “fell like they get superhero powers” or “feel like a princess” with their own words. Therefore, it can be said that packaging not only creates an association with the brand, but also it creates an opportunity for experience for children.

As in any study, there are some limitations that should be taken into account in the interpretation of the results. Firstly, since the observations only contained one type of product, the findings cannot be generalized. In the further studies, some more product types can be included in the observations.

Moreover, as a future research, a comparative study with products having two different levels of involvement, can be advised to see how packaging affects different buying processes.

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