HOW TO ENGAGE CHILDREN INTO THE WORLD OF TRADITIONAL CAR BRANDS? EXPLORATION OF SPECIFIC TOUCHPOINTS BETWEEN FUTURE BUYERS IN THE CAR INDUSTRY AND ESTABLISHED BRANDS

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This paper aims to define the consumer journey of children through their childhood stages and provide specific touchpoints relevant for a given age, which could be integrated into the marketing communication of car brands to start building this young audience as future buyers. A qualitative study of children in different age brackets was used to identify their current and potential touchpoints with the car industry. The results of the study present specific stands on the prepurchase stage of the children's consumer journey where the brand might interact with children and build the long-term positive attitudes of this group of potential customers. Specific implications for the industry in terms of understanding the language of the mobile game applications, computer games, YouTubers and integrating those specific activities into the brand's marketing communication are highlighted for the car industry marketers.

Keywords: consumer decision journey; brand touchpoints; advertising to children
JEL classification: M30, M31, M37, O25

1. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to study the optimal integration of marketing communications targeted to children throughout their childhood. The questions we ask are how to educate our future customers in an efficient way to become our future buyers, how to start a dialogue, and how to build a positive relationship with them? To do this, we are mapping their lifecycle through various touchpoints with brands in the automotive industry and, as result, we present specific ideas for reaching this target group. Global sales of passenger cars are forecast to hit 78 million in 2017 (compared to 72 million produced cars in 2016). Volkswagen is the fourth largest advertiser worldwide (behind P&G, Unilever and L'Oréal) (Statista, 2017).

The outcome of this article, in the form of understanding the consumer journey, is useful for marketing strategies of different brands in the car industry as well as others, by offering a comprehensive framework with which to work. "If a business nurtures kids as future consumers, they are more apt to like the company and prefer its products and services once they get old enough to buy them on their own" (McNeal, 1999). Research literature though usually does not provide business practitioners with specific examples and tools of how to fulfil the consumer journey model for their implementation in practice. This paper aims to fill this gap by defining the consumer journey of children, through their childhood stages and providing specific touchpoints relevant for a given age, which could then be integrated into marketing communication to start cultivating them as future buyers.

2. Literature Review

Efficient integrated marketing communication (IMC) is the outcome of properly understood consumer behavior and a detailed map of the decision journey and information processing. Per Rajeev Batra, the current consumer decision journey is significantly different from what it was in the past, in that it requires much more carefully designed and implemented IMC programs to ensure maximal results, with the deployment of stage-appropriate media and messages in optimal sequences (Batra & Keller, 2016).

Why do marketers need to involve children in the purchasing process? According to McNeal, children occupy three types of target markets: (i) primary market, spending their own money on their own wants and needs, (ii) influence market, determining most of the spending of their parents, and (iii) future market, as they will become a potential market for all goods and services (McNeal, 1999, p. 16). It is not completely clear when marketers realized the purchasing power or future purchasing power of children. McNeal points out that, late in the 1980s, the same time patterns were already valid for children as influencers (McNeal, 1999, p. 18). Cross (2002) believes that the turning point when children gained stronger influencer power was in the middle of the 20th century when the industries and advertising agencies realized the opportunity to target children with tailor-made products in various categories (breakfast cereal and beverages for example) instead of providing just modified versions of products targeted to adults (Cross, 2002).

For companies, innovativeness leads to growth and profitability (Aaker, 2007). They invest significant amounts in marketing programs to enhance innovativeness because they realize how important they are for future growth. Future growth might be, in certain categories, connected with current children who become future customers in a decade or two. In specific categories (traditional car producers being one of them), the new entrants might appeal to the young target audience to the extent that they do not even include traditional producers into their frame of reference.

The Institute of Social Marketing at the University of Stirling examined pester power[1] and its effects on purchasing behavior of children and their parents. In the past, the research was focused on the link between watching TV commercials and influencing purchasing decisions of the parents. Galst & White concluded that TV commercials do influence children's consumer behavior, and that children influence product purchases (Galst & White, 1976). Most research on children's behavior has been focused on food brands, due to rising obesity issues amongst children in the last decades of the 20th century. The systematic review of the Institute of Social Marketing found that food

1 Director General of the Advertising Association defines pester power as "a pejorative term for children making requests of their parents" (McDermott, O'Sullivan, Stead, & Hastings, 2006), others as "purchase influence attempts", e.g. the child's attempt to influence purchases by making an independent request for an item (by asking, pointing, putting it in the shopping basket, or grabbing), buying an item with his or her own money, or deciding when given a choice by the parent) (Galst & White, 1976).

advertising does cause "pestering" by children and results in parents buying less healthy products that are associated with obesity (McDermott, O'Sullivan, Stead, & Hastings, 2006).

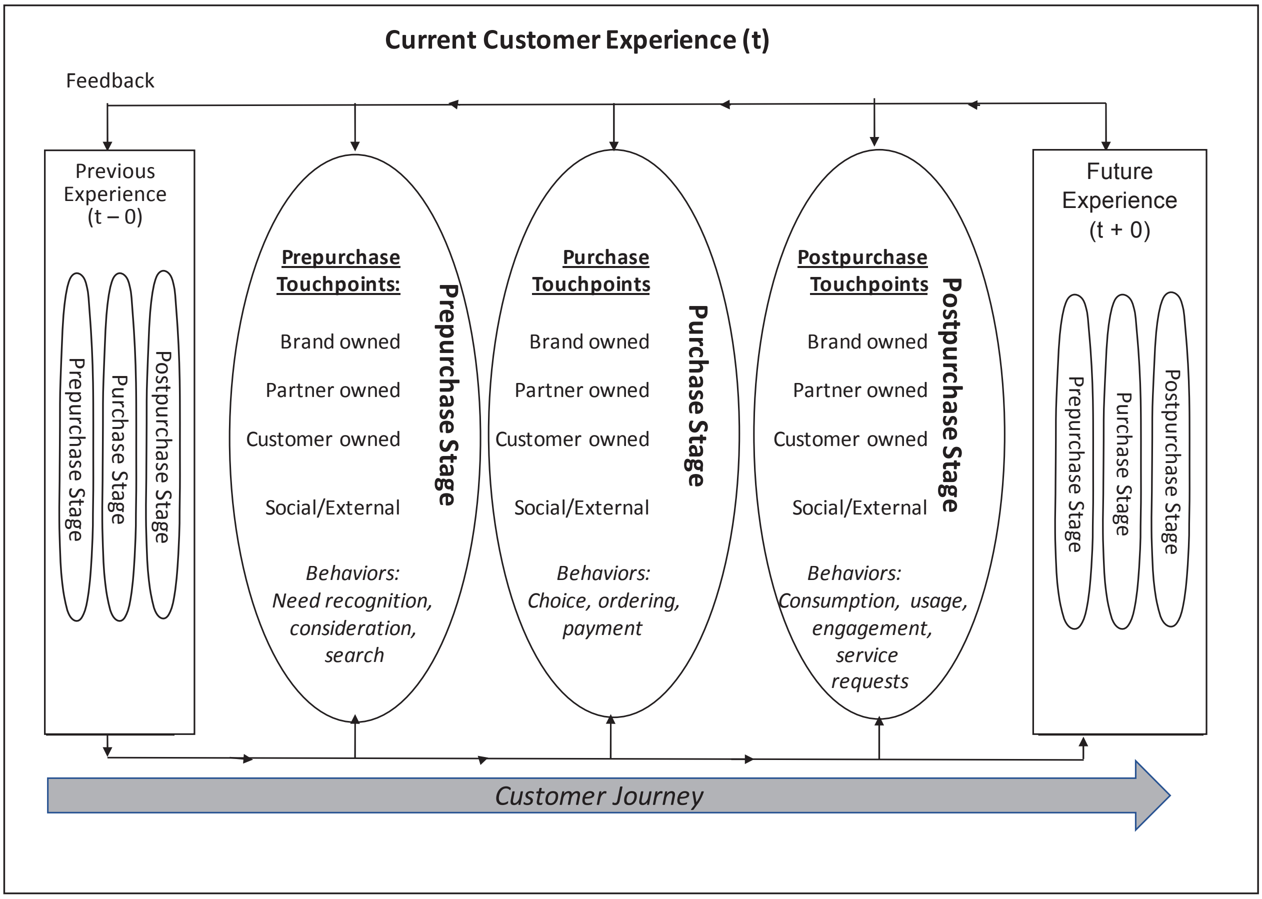
According to our previous research, the majority of the ads targeted to children are noticed on TV (by 92% of the respondents), points of purchase (80%), internet (74%), print (66%) and billboards (51%). Almost half of the respondents noticed food and drinks advertising targeted to children at places like schools, kinder-gardens, playgrounds (47% of the sample) and in children´s books (47%) (Olšanová, Lhotáková, & Karel, 2016). Specific touchpoints between the target audience of children and brands, regardless of the media type, has thus far not been explored in enough detail for business practice.

Based on data collected through the Net Children Go Mobile survey of approximately 3500 respondents aged 9 -16 in seven European countries (Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Romania and the United Kingdom), children are going mobile and social. Smartphones are the devices that children are more likely to own (53%) or use to go online at least once a day. Social networking, entertainment on media sharing platforms, and sharing content with others are all on the rise (Mascheroni & Olafsson, 2016). On the contrary, children spend less time in front of traditional TV. In Australia, between 2001 and 2013, there was a 9% decline in the average daily number of children watching television in cities. Notably, there has also been a decline in child viewers - from 13% to 11% of the potential child audience (ACMA, 2015). The latest OfCom's communication report in the U.K. reports similar findings: children are watching less broadcast television as they turn to online activities and services such as YouTube (OfCom, 2017). OfCom reports that steepest decline in average viewing of broadcast TV was among children (4-15) and young adults aged 16-24. Viewing fell across almost all age groups across this period (2016 compared to 2011), but the decline has been greatest among young adults aged 16-24 and children aged 4-15, for whom viewing dropped by around a third. It is becoming more difficult for the advertisers, resp. brands to reach children due to the rise of the subscription based services which are often advertising free (OfCom, 2017).

Complete understanding of the consumer paths to purchase and decision funnels for the specific product categories must be linked to specific brands and a precise target audience. According to Batra & Keller, there is no single path to purchase shared by all consumers. However, there can be a general sense of the kinds of decision journeys taken by different sets of consumers and their likely attitudes and behaviors at different stages along the way (Batra & Keller, 2016).

Customer experience is framed by three general stages, as shown in Figure 1. Prepurchase encompasses the customer's experience from the beginning of the need/goal/impulse recognition to consideration of satisfying that need/goal/impulse with a purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) (Hoyer, 1984). The second stage – purchase – has been traditionally described by choice making, ordering and payment, with high focus on the shopping experience within the retail industry. Nowadays, in certain categories, the importance of the purchase stage is declining as the prepurchase evaluation does not allow customers to entry the purchase zone. Postpurchase covers aspects of the customer's experience after purchase that relate to the purchased product, which itself becomes a critical touchpoint at this stage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 76).

Figure 1 | Model for consumer journey and experience



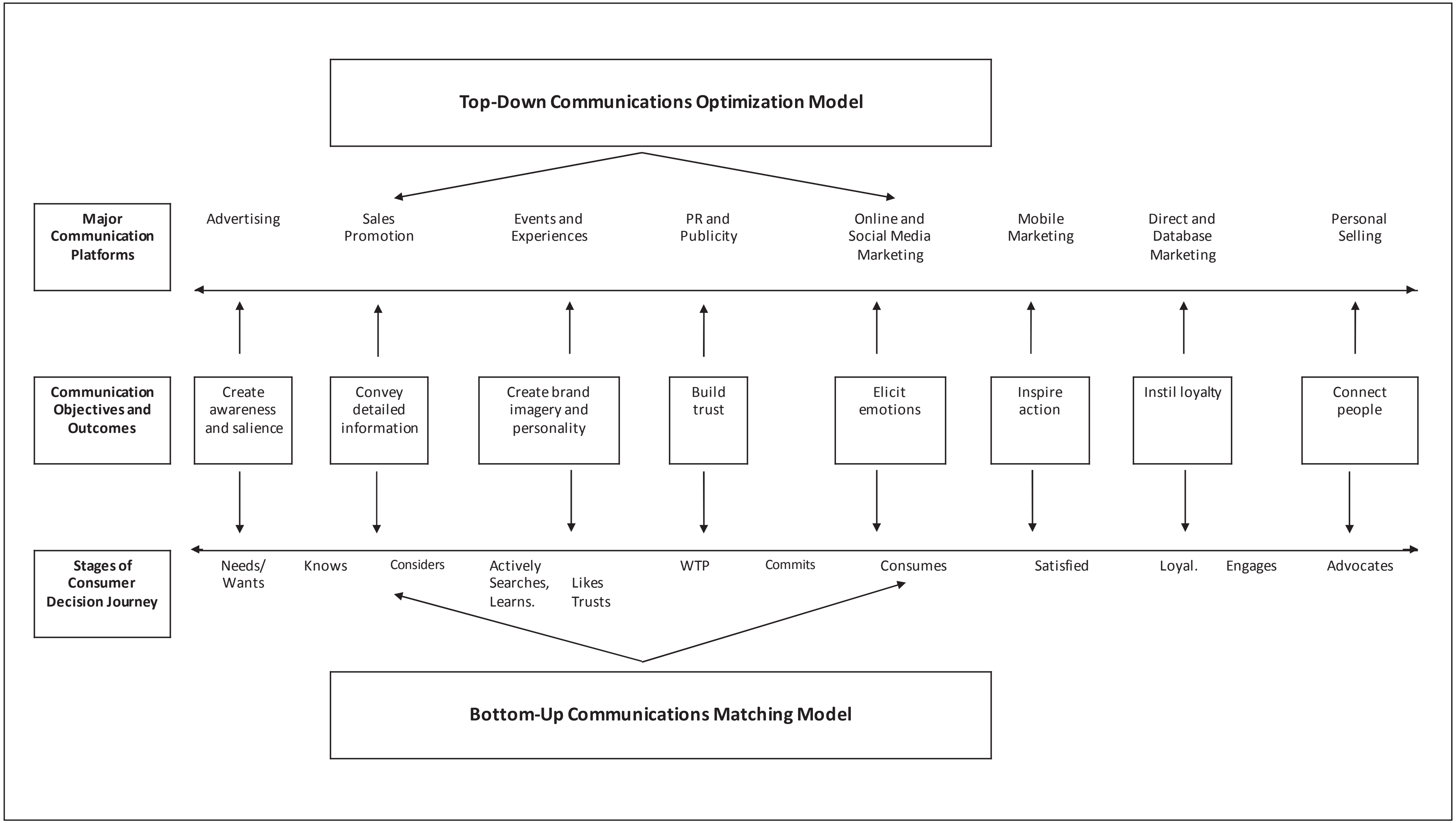
Source: authors, based on (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77)

To optimize the IMC, each stage of the journey should be explored in terms of identifying the most relevant touchpoints. There are four types of touchpoints that influence each stage of the journey: brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned and social/external. It is important to identify the critical touchpoints ("moments of truth") throughout the journey that have the most significant influence on key customer outcomes (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

In this article, we focus on understanding and analyzing the prepurchase stage. The communication objectives of specific actions that can be undertaken towards potential future buyers in the prepurchase stage are to create awareness and salience (how easily and often customers think of the brand under various purchase or consumption situations (Keller, 2009). When the brand is associated with a wide variety of cues (categories, situations, need states, etc.), salience occurs (Aaker, 2007)); propensity to create brand imagery and personality; to build trust; to elicit emotions; to instill loyalty and to connect people. These objectives are linked to specific stages of the consumer journey and major communication channels (Figure 2) (Batra & Keller, 2016, p. 137).

The aim of this article is to understand the prepurchase stage of children's future customer journey, with the purpose to influence their purchase decisions which they make as young adults. Therefore, we focus on detailed analyses of the touchpoints at the prepurchase phase. We need to understand and map the customer journey from the children's perspective. To do so, primary data were collected through interviews with children of different age groups.

Figure 2 | IMC Framework



Source: authors based on (Batra & Keller, 2016, p. 137)

3. Research Methodology

Qualitative research in different forms overcomes the obstacle of children's naturally lower ability to express their own opinions compared to adults. Content analysis is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic contents of all forms of recorded communications (Kolbe & Burnett, 1991). Recruitment criteria consisted of gender equality in each age group and a high level of communication skills for each respondent. Due to a different level of openness and communication skills, the units were different for each age group: 2 mini focus groups with pre-school children (3 - 6 years old), 1 male and 1 female dyad in both younger (7 - 10) and older school age (11 - 14), and finally four individual in-depth interviews with high school children (15 – 18 years). Projective techniques were used to find the hidden and unconscious reasons behind the children's behavior and thinking. The interviews were video-recorded and detailed transcripts were used for subsequent analysis. Recruitment was done in one pre-school, one elementary school and one high school in selected Slovakian city. Cooperation with teachers and parents was necessary (permission slips for parents, recruitment assistance of teacher in the pre-school). Field-work was conducted in March 2017 in Slovakia, based on the scenarios adapted for the specific ages of the children.

4. Results

4.1 Advertising and children – higher attention to on-line

We were exploring the general attitudes of children towards the advertising in TV, print, on-line and point of sales (POS), and consequently we prompted the respondents about car advertising. We can conclude that they claim their attention during the TV advertising breaks as rather low: "*I tend to have a little break during the advertising to be able to watch the whole film" (girl, 9 years old).* When prompted about cars, the preschool children did not recall any brand, just colors. Elementary school students recalled some branded campaigns (Peugeot, Škoda as examples). High schoolers were more specific about the advertising content (equipment, new technologies, engine).

Print advertising seems to be confusing for pre-school children. They tend to consider each car picture in print as a commercial. Elementary and high school groups were consistent in noting car ads in print. They perceived the information provided there as signs or prompts and when interested, they go on-line to search for more information. The highest awareness of car commercials amongst the respondents came from the internet, namely YouTube. High schoolers are able to understand and explain the mechanics of ads on YouTube: *"According to the rules, you have to post a video longer than 10 minutes. Then you can sell the ad space there. And banners – they pop-up and I find it annoying*"*; (boy, 15 years);* and find it somehow distracting.

In summary, the attitudes of the respondents towards advertising was neutral. The older they are, the more interested they are in car advertising – boys tend to watch or read more about technologies and news in the car industry, while girls note the lifestyle and stories of the car commercials.

4.2 Viewership of TV disrupted by the content on alternative screens

We were exploring the attitudes of children towards different communication channels relevant for their age. TV was perceived differently by different age groups. Pre-schoolers tend not to consider TV as key media type. Movies mentioned by them include themes of fighting (boys) or magic (girls). The younger group of elementary school children was keener on TV, especially Nickelodeon with series like SpongeBob and Big Time Rush. This seems to be the age when they enjoy watching various series but they are not always on TV: *"My favorite movies are not on TV, but on the computer" (boy, 9 years old)*. The older group of elementary school pupils confirmed watching TV after having dinner with their parents. Multiscreening has already became a part of their family evening. Online, especially YouTube is gaining importance as automatic redirection for this group when the TV content gets boring: *"There is always something on YouTube. I watch especially the Czech YouTubers. Jirka Král and I've got approximately 7 – 8 favorite ones." (boy, 13 years old).* High schoolers watch TV when needed, but always with their mobile in hand. Multiscreening is a tool to overcome boring TV watched by their parents: *"When I see the TV program for the evening, I do not even turn it on. My mum is watching TV for the whole evening, I watch with her, but I am on my mobile"; (girl, 18 years old).*

The frequency of viewing of the traditional media is low and the viewership is constantly disturbed by multiscreening. The advertising awareness of any car brand is low. Children are more familiar with YouTube advertising and banners on the internet. They perceive it negatively: "*banners, not on mobile but on the computer, they either appear before the video or pop-up. This distracts me."; (boy, 15 years old)*. Children look acquainted with the financial effects of advertising. They seem to understand to role of "sponsors" for the content they like.

4.3 Internet and social media on the rise, focus on content management

The internet and its most popular usage was discussed in depth with the high schoolers. Facebook was claimed as no longer being the first social network option; it is considered as a social media "dinosaur". Especially high schoolers seek more creative, interactive and entertaining content offered by video content. They have switched to more dynamic social platforms and internet sites such as YouTube, Instagram, Mojevideo.sk, Refresher.cz or streaming channels (Spotify). *"It used to be Facebook, instantly, when I opened my computer. But nowadays this is YouTube. Or Spotify, where I listen to my music"; (girl, 18 years old)*. Boys follow the premium car brands on social networks (Instagram and Facebook). Content wise, their attention is drawn to short videos or attractive pictures rather than descriptive ones. *"It has to be fun, unique" (girl, 18 years old).* The examples of the content that might have a positive impact for boys are road-trip documentaries, road-tests and car model comparisons, done in an entertaining way.

4.4 YouTube - top influencer, if authentic

High schoolers follow both local and international YouTubers and, importantly, they appreciate their honesty and authenticity, regardless of their nationality. They understand when YouTubers are sponsored and when prompted, they find it difficult to identify a brand that would suit to their favorite YouTubers and look reasonably natural. *"It would be difficult to find someone who would naturally represent a brand. I wouldn't recommend anyone who would do it so ostentatiously"*; (girl, 18 years old).

4.5 Gaming through mobile applications, computer games for teenagers

High school children prefer mobile phones for free time combined with a laptop as a tool for their homework or school projects. The younger the age group, the more they use tablets. Traditional computers are not preferred nor used by any of the age groups. Computer games are no longer played on computers by our respondents. Game consoles (PlayStation, XBOX), together with tablets and mobiles, have taken the role of the device for playing games amongst the respondents. The lifecycle of the games is very short as children search instantly for newer, more attractive ones. Minecraft is viewed as one of the few exceptions due to its high penetration and objectives combining survival with strategy. Table 1 summarizes spontaneously mentioned games with key motives for playing and preferred devices. Cars are one of the means used by games producers for these age groups. Key motives for playing are different by age groups.

Table 1 | Games spontaneously mentioned by age groups

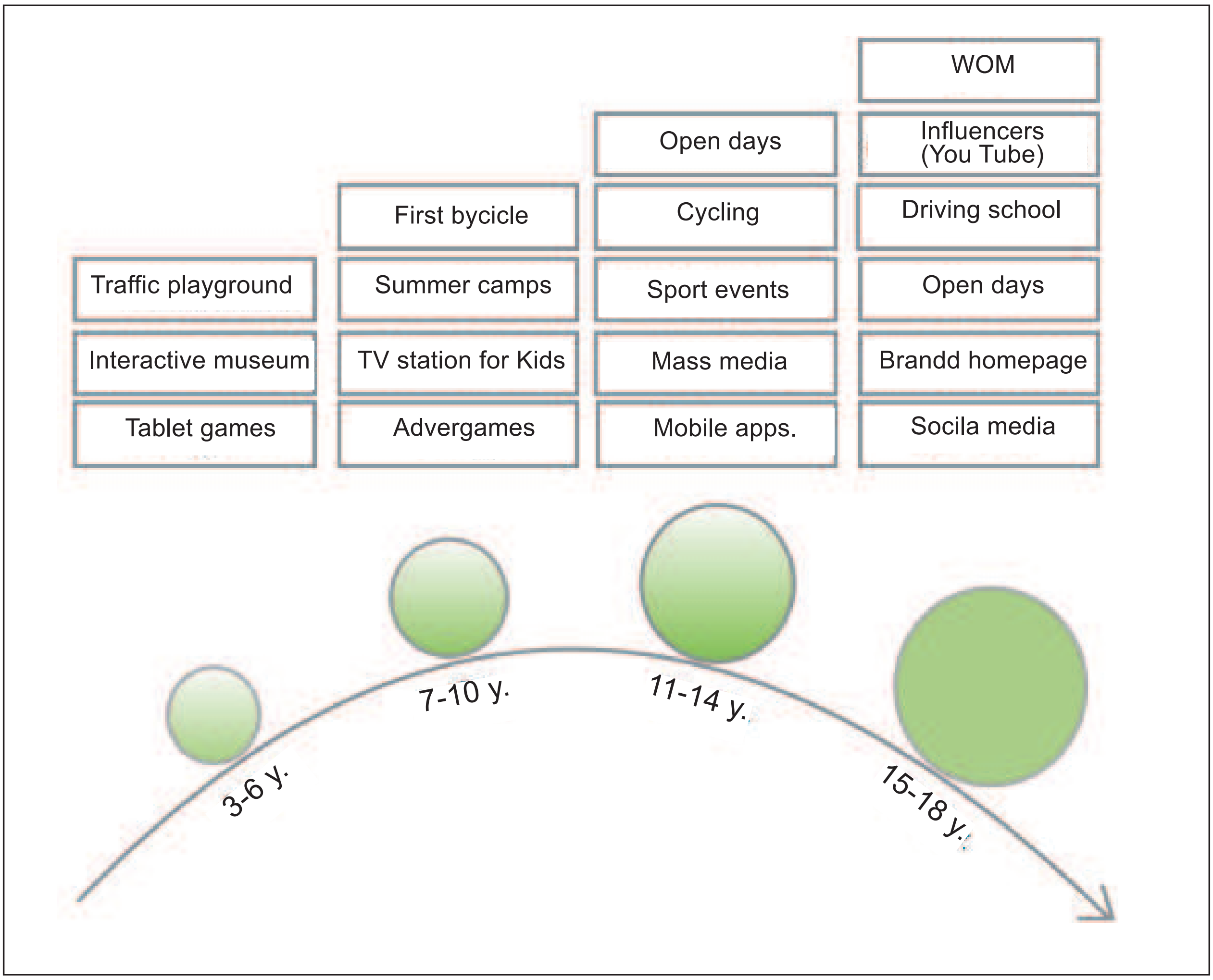
	Game mentioned	Key motives for playing	Device
Pre-school children	Name not identified	Collecting coins	Tablets
	Batman	Collecting gold	Tablets
	Mr. Bean		Mobile
Younger school age	High Climb Rocking	Search lost home	Tablet
	War of Robots	Collecting coins for purchasing new robots	Tablet
	Minecraft	Survival	Tablet
	Five nights at Freddy's Crossy Road	Collection coins	Tablet
Older school age	World of Tanks	Fight, improvements	Tablet
	Avakin Life	Virtual world	Mobile
	Pokémon Go	Collection Pokémons	Mobile
	YouTube/Facebook	Alternative to game at this age	Mobile
High school	GTA5	Car tuning, mission controls	Game consoles
	Clash of Clans	Survival/strategy	Mobile
	YouTube/Facebook	Alternative to game	Mobile

Source: authors, based on qualitative research

4.6 Specific touchpoints between children and car brands

We were exploring the perception of the touchpoints between children and an automotive brand through prompting a series of obvious ideas, e.g. traffic rules playgrounds, museums, open days and car shops. Traffic rules playgrounds were perceived highly positively as part of their long-term memory. They recall both the adventure and the learning process, especially the used transport vehicles (bicycles, small electric cars, etc.): *"We were there with my grandmother. We were cycling there. We chased there, slipped and crawled. And we were on such an electric car. And even on such an electric motor, what you're up and going!"; (girl, 5 years old).* The perception of museums was more neutral.

Figure 3 | Scheme of the first potential touchpoints between a brand and different age levels, as presented by the results of the qualitative research



Source: authors, based on qualitative research

They recalled some visits but nothing really exciting for the age groups. The older they are, the more positive attitude was related to interactivity of the museum expositions. Automotive industry was an exception as they appreciate not only the interactivity and games but also the evolution of the brands, old car expositions or interesting facts combined with cars history. They also recalled visits of the open house days and shops of car brands. The awareness of car brands was associated with different refreshments provided at the open house days or small items that could be bought at the car shop. The mentioned memories resonated in the minds of respondents thanks to the variety of refreshments and obtained gifts. Respondents bought small branded items (e.g. keychains, watches, T-shirts) in showrooms as a present or even for themselves.

The most relevant potential and current touchpoints between the children at different ages and an automotive brand are summarized in Figure 3. It is important to realize that it is needed to translate them into the language attractive for the specific target audience of the future buyers. Museums, as an example for 3-6 year olds, become attractive when we sell it as: “Brand X Fun Park” or ”Car Craft” as the museum itself has a rather neutral – negative perception connected with “boring”.

5. Conclusions

Brand management should consider the general touchpoints highlighted above as potential points where their brand might interact with children as their future buyers. An innovative brand surprises consumers and makes them feel a “wow”. This wow factor is the one setting them apart from their competitors and makes it so they can be branded as the best (Shams, Alpert, & Brown, 2015). To make the potential touchpoints relevant for a specific age group, appropriate translation in terms of the language suitable for each group should be used by industry marketers to make their future audience feel excited and positive about the brand in their current world.

Airlines, smartphones, computers or traditional car industries are examples of industries where marketers are searching to build a long-term positive relationship with children as future customers. The car industry is currently facing a series of challenges resulting in the fact that children of their current loyal customers are gaining crucial importance for the future brand sales. Table 2 provides an overview of the relevant stands of the children on their consumer journey linked to specific touchpoints with the brand highlighted by our research.

Involving YouTubers and games (applications) is key in most of the age groups. The need for games is driven by two different motivations: (i) to relieve boredom when they, for example, wait for public transportation or spend breaks at schools; and (ii) to compete with friends. The first type of games on phones is called a “cascade” game where children simply collect points/coins/levels. They use their stamina to become better at the game for potential future sharing with their friends. The second motive is fulfilled by significantly more strategic games, played online with a group of friends. This is a new method of peer socializing for them. These games are usually played in their free time when all the school and home duties are done. Both YouTubers’ involvement and gaming should respect the children’s need for authenticity and credibility. The importance of YouTube as an online channel as well as the perceived decline of Facebook among younger generations were also found in another recent study on the younger generations’ attitudes towards cars done by Bahles and Cook (Cook & Bahles, 2017).

Games, YouTube and nice memories of trips with the parents, are, according to our research, the most significant moments of truth with significant influence on children’s behavior. Smart incorporation of these into the brand’s IMC, using innovative language, makes it easier for the future customers to be aware of and trust the brand.

Table 2 | Potential touchpoints assigned to different stages of the consumer journey (according to qualitative research)

ConsumerJourney Stages (with focus on prepurchase stage)	Potential touchpoints between children and automotive industry brands at different stages of children's consumer journey		
	Pre-school	Elementary School	High School
They feel a need or want for the overall category of which the brand is a part	Formula car Needfor speed (boys) Magic (girls) Transport to holidays Shopping with the parents Trips with the parents (bicycling) Transport to the weekend houses	Nickelodeon TV station Big Time Rush Movies (computer, no TV)	Older car resellers
They recall the brand they associate with meeting that category-level need	Museums (car), e.g. xx Landia	Specific games (Crossy Road, Hill Climb Rocking Virtual games – creating their own world Minecraft Simpsons	GTA 5 Clash of clans Instagram Facebook
Develop a preference and make a tentative choice		Youtubers	Car driving schools Youtubers
They form an assessment of post-consumption satisfaction with the brand	Museums (car), e.g. xx Landia Family	Museums (car) – including traditional, focus on innovations or history Family	Museums – interactivity needed Family
They engage in post-purchase interactions with the brand	Family	Family	Family
They become loyal and willing to advocate the brand	Peers discussions You Tube Youtubers	You Tube Youtubers	You Tube Youtubers Websites Tour de France Spotify

Source: authors, based on results of our research

5.1 Managerial Implications

The automotive industry is being challenged by disruptive technology-driven trends transforming the industry. These trends in terms of diverse mobility, autonomous driving, electrification and connectivity will affect the traditional manufactures and the automotive value chain (McKinsey & Company, 2016, p. 4). New players are entering the segment with new mobility solutions. Interbrand's list of Breakthrough Brands include those that are industry disruptors as they change the way business is done. The mobility section includes brands of car sharing (Didi Chuxing, Drivy), bike rental (ofo), urban electric scooters (Unu) and driverless electric shuttles (Navya) (Interbrand, 2017). Unu, as an example, has turned the traditional business model of the automotive industry upside down. A customer configures his/her scooter which is then manufactured and shipped to him/her (Unumotors, 2017).

The brands ranked in Breakthrough must fulfil the following criteria: (i) answer a unique need in the marketplace or generating an entirely new experience, (ii) drive business growth and evolve the marketplace; and (iii) drive engagement of customers and capture attention of the investors (Interbrand, 2017). These brands are new entrants who initially target just specific, economically attractive segments of customers. As they evolve, they contribute (together with those who already create the buzz in the traditional car industry [Apple, Tesla, Google, Uber, etc.]) to squeeze the current competitive landscape by targeting the most profitable part of the market. This target group is currently still young, though, according to our research, open to innovations, not far from being off the traditional media and searching for not just technological advances in each innovation but also for innovative language and credibility of potential influencers. We highlighted YouTube as the media type on the rise compared to Facebook, which our respondents perceived as out-of-date. Recently Facebook has introduced a new Watch feature noted by experts as "Facebook TV" and a competitive reaction to YouTube (Warc News, 2017). This innovation is, in line with Facebook's mission, focused on content and content sharing in the scope of the recent YouTube growth amongst young target audiences.

As the traditional car industry evolves, it might lose the new customers entering the segment in favor of the new "breakthrough" brand focused on innovations in both technology and language. To avoid this, brands need to work with the youngest groups of future customers and build a positive relationship between them and the brand. Traditional brands have certain advantages vs. the new entrants. In each step of the purchasing process, the brand owned by the parents plays an important role. A car is a product of long-term consumption, where the decision-making process starts much earlier than the purchase stage. Therefore, it is essential not only to retain a relationship with current potential customers (parents), but future ones (children), too. Our research pointed out the specific touchpoints on the future customers' consumer journey. Understanding the language of the mobile game applications, computer games, YouTubers and integrating these specific activities into the brand's marketing communication is the approach that will pay back in terms of a positive relationship between the brand and its future customers.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

Mapping the consumer journey might be a guide for necessary changes in the marketing communication for a traditional automobile brand to ensure sustainable growth in the future and engagement of the new entrants into the industry. This is not a one-step exercise, and requires long-term effort for which the rationale and tools are introduced in the research results part of this article.

It is important to mention that all limitations of the qualitative study apply to the results presented here. The scale of the interviews (2 mini-focus groups, 2 dyads, and 4 individual in-depth interviews) and geographical limitation (1 pre-school, 1 elementary school and 1 high school in Slovakian city) are the main limitation and subsequent quantitative research based on current qualitative findings is an opportunity to fill the gap in terms of generalization of the results. But, as children are involved, the limitations would occur even in a quantitative phase.

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