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FACULTY OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION**

PhD FIELD: MARKETING

**A STUDY ON THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF TV COMMERCIALS ON
CHILDREN FROM PRIMARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL**

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KEY WORDS: advertising, commercial, children, materialism, parent-child conflict, disappointment, frustration, unhealthy eating habits

INTRODUCTION

Choosing the subject of the thesis was a very difficult task for me, and I believe most of the PhD students first deal with this problem. It is actually a challenge that, most of the times, we want to face it, hoping to approach a subject as interesting and as original as possible.

The decision of choosing this subject is based on a series of previous concerns regarding the effects of ads on the behaviour of those consumers represented by children, concerns objectified in direct and, namely, indirect observation, by means of the parents, of the children's improper reactions, both when exposed at the advertisement messages, and subsequently, when choosing.

And from this point to raising some questions about the possible negative effects that ads might have on children, was only a step. Some people may consider it strangely, why children might be affected, how could ads influent to such an extend as repercussions are visible. In this case, we should not think about anything else but the different family purchasing, no matter the product nature. Though the parents own financial control, most of the times, children are those who own the essential control within this process.

Another important reason for choosing the subject was the book "Happiness as an obligation – Psychology and sociology of advertising" (Brune, 2003). This special book was recommended by my thesis advisor Professor Ioan Plăiaș, PhD. Ioan Plăiaș also manifested an additional reason for drawing my attention on this matter.

As we all know, most of researches undertaken on advertising focus on ads efficiency, on aspects related to their understanding, on the transmission of a message as clear and as profound as possible. Still, if we look carefully, the children became the centre of attention when advertising is conceived. From an early age, he is regarded as a consumer. Do you think this is purely random? Would a lot of money be spent unless some remarkable results were noticed? Frankly, I do not think so. And this is why I decided to start searching related materials. I had difficulties due to the lack of an available bibliography, there were moments when I was thinking I had made the wrong choice, but calm was settling after the discussions

with my thesis advisor, who was encouraging me each time, mentioning about the chance of performing a research stage abroad. And, finally, the chance came. I found an article of a Professor from Amsterdam and I realised we were having common concerns. We started to correspond in view of an eventual collaboration, asking her to accept my visit to that university in view of a research stage. The Professor's answer was positive, giving me the big chance to be accepted. I consider that the experience that I had there clarified my future plans.

Therefore, the main goal of this survey is to confirm/infirm the relation between the exposure to TV ads and their negative effects (materialism, parent-child conflict, disappointment, frustration, unhealthy eating habits) in case of pupils from primary and middle school. Moreover, the moderating factors are studied (age, sex, communication between parent and child regarding the ads) concerning the aforesaid relations, in order to identify certain significant differences between different groups.

In what concerns the structure of the survey itself, this contains three theoretical chapters, designed to underline the important aspects related to the subject. In the first chapter, we intend to clarify the basic concepts, the illustration of the major trends in view of the exemplification of a so-called evolution regarding the consumers approach by means of advertising, the illustration of the main types of ads in order to subsequently underline the reason for choosing the TV ads, their typical functions, the relation between the human being and the advertising, different controversy raised, as well as other aspects related to persuasion, manipulation, ethics and stereotypes.

The second chapter is strictly focused on aspects related to children, these being regarded as an important segment of consumers. Thereby, the TV ads were revealed as influence factors, as well as other aspects related to childhood marketing, the main children's role in advertising media, aspects which these are based on, their levels of influence, the persuasion tactics used, the ethic aspects that interceded, the cultivation theory, as well as the paradigms and the highlighting of the target advertising, thus underlining the approach of the vulnerable segments.

Folding on the two aforesaid paradigms, the second chapter is dedicated to the two large categories of effects: the intended and the unintended ones, our attention drawing especially on the second category, these effects being the first to be considered as negative ones.

The second part focuses on the particularization of the research methodology, followed by the highlighting of the research results.

The creation of the database subject to the research required hard work. First of all, the access to the target group was difficult and full of adventures. Still, I had the chance to get support from the school inspectorate, without which I would not be able to discuss today about this subject, as the access in those 25 schools was also, in these conditions, an adventure. While managing and sharing the questionnaires, I was dealing with mixed feelings of humility, satisfaction, gratitude, respect, disappointment and surprise. Most of the times I was feeling as a beggar, with no right to sit at the rich meal, and other times, as a queen. Thus, the end was really motivating, namely managing to get 1693 available questionnaires.

The final part of the present survey underlines the conclusions, the identified limits, highlighting the main future research directions that I suggested.

CHAPTER 1

ADVERTISING AND COMMERCIALS – INSIGHTS AND CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES

This chapter underlines the general theoretical aspects of the treated subject, as well as the actual stage of knowledge in this field. A first step was the capture of the significations of each term, as well as of different conceptual approaches illustrated in the specialty literature, both in what concerns the advertising, and the commercials. I focused as well on the conceptual delimitation between the two terms, offering a perspective in this respect. I presented the major trends of commercial promotion in view of a so-called evolution related to the consumers approach. These four trends, thus illustrated somehow gradually, do nothing but complete one another, adjusting themselves depending on different underlying situations and motivations.

Further, I illustrated the main types of ads, in order to subsequently highlight the reason for choosing the TV ads, their typical functions in different approaches, the relation between the human being and the advertising, as well as different controversy raised. The ads criticism within the approaches in the specialty literature may be grouped in four categories, namely: the ads content, the promoted product, the excessive visibility of ads and the improper social effects.

The commercials and the advertising, generally, aim to persuade the public with respect to different aspects, bringing into discussion the persuasion concept. Thereby, some specialists (T. O’Guinn, together with other two colleagues) reached the conclusion that “advertising is a persuasive means of communication, having the role to modify the receivers attitude in terms of acquisition of a certain product or service, the qualities of which are real ” (Nicola & Petre, 200, p.4). I have further approached the concept of ethics and the way this is violated when ads come into discussion. In the same context, the stereotypes have also been assessed from several points of view, and their classification has been performed, mentioning the fact that they may have positive and negative aspects as well, especially on children.

CHAPTER 2

CHILDREN – AN IMPORTANT SEGMENT OF CONSUMERS

The second chapter strictly refers to the aspects where children are involved, these being considered an important segment of consumers. Therefore, the TV commercials have been regarded as a negative influence factor on children, assessment confirmed also by Susan Linn, manager of “Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood”: “It’s hard time when you need to focus on children’s education. No other parents’ generation, in the entire history, has never faced this 17 billion dollar industry (the industry of products for children) that works day and night in order to avoid the parents and to target children with messages undermining the parental values” (<http://documentare.digitalarena.ro/copiii-consumatori-comercializare-a-copilariei-2008/>). The childhood marketing is a reality nowadays, the children being regarded as a future promising market, and often the target of the promotion campaigns aiming to counterfeit, from an early age, the loyalty towards the brand (Moore, 2004). Synthesizing the survey results based on various researches, it was found that the expansion of the marketing aiming the children, and the TV as well, did nothing but intensifying the concern about the impact of the commercial world on children health and welfare, their desires being manipulatively and harmfully affected (Steemers,2010). A series of errors occurred in the advertising environment have been remarked in this respect, the phenomenon of childhood manipulation being extremely actual and in the same time dangerous. This was illustrated in the documentary „Consuming Kids – The Commercialization of Childhood” in 2008, that tries to warn about the practices used within the commercials, their main purpose being to sell children of any product in any form.

I have illustrated, further, the main roles of children within the advertising environment, aspects that these roles and their influence levels underlie. We then focused on the tactics of persuasion of children, six of them being identified and considered to be frequently and efficiently used (Esther Rozendaal, 2011). In the same context, the hypnosis concept may be brought into discussion, a series of similarities between this and TV being identified. All these do nothing but to facilitate the highlighting of ethncial aspects directly linked to children.

The survey regarding the commercials effects is based on two paradigms (Buijzen, 2003; Valkenburg, 2004), illustrated together with the related effects in the figure below:

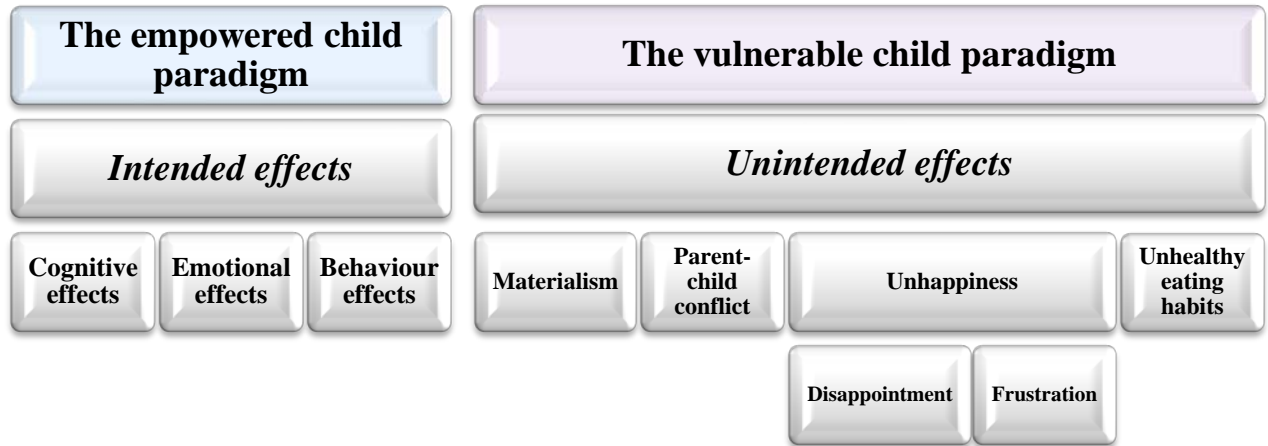


Figure 1: Classification of the commercials effects depending on the basis paradigm

Source: Made by the author

Another element of interest is the approach of the targeted advertising that highlights the approach of the vulnerable segments. The vulnerable persons are those persons „more susceptible to economical, physical, psychological harm in, or as a result of economic transactions because of characteristics that limit their ability to maximize their utility and wellbeing” (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997, p.4).

This phenomenon of addressing to these segments may raise different ethical problems, the target segments being unable to be aware about the substrate notions illustrated. The approach of the ethical aspects must be brought into discussion each time the target market is chosen.

CHAPTER 3


COMMERCIALS EFFECTS


The third chapter focuses on analysing to the two large categories of effects: the intended and the unintended ones, our attention drawing especially on the last ones, these effects being considered as negative ones. The classification of the commercials effects was illustrated, both intended and unintended, and a series of correlational and experimental surveys, aiming to highlight the link between the commercials and the possible generated effects, being brought as an example.


At the basis of this work there is the testing and the improvement of the pattern designed by Moniek Buijzen and Patti M. Valkenburg (2003b), which is based on the three unintended effects of the commercials: materialism, parent-child conflict and disappointment, the last one being operationalized by using two distinct concepts: disappointment and frustration.


The unintended effects of commercials were a special preoccupation of the aforesaid researchers, these sketching a theoretical pattern based on the specialty literature in this field, the model being subsequently tested on a sample of 360 children aged between eight and twelve years. An extremely important aspect that is to be mentioned is the fact that parents also took part in this survey, their answers being used either for comparing the two perspectives, or for obtaining additional information not held by children. The survey results highlighted, on one hand, a positive and direct relation between the exposure to commercials and the manifestation of the purchasing request and respectively, the materialism. On the other hand, in the same positive way, there were identified relations between the visualisation of advertisings and the family conflict, disappointment and frustration, but this time in an indirect way, by means of the purchasing request, in this case, the last one being considered a mediating variable.


Concerning the assumptions of our survey, these are reflected in the suggested model, as following:


-  **H1:** Exposure of children at TV commercials leads to the accentuation of their materialistic notions (prior appreciation of goods and money in life).


-  **H2:** The ads content on national TV channels is reflected in the increasing of the children's purchasing requests addressed to their parents, the chance of a conflict between a parent and his child being incremented.


-  **H3:** The commercials contribute to the intensification of the conflict between parents and their children.

-  **H4:** The commercials determine materialism, which can subsequently turns into frustration.

-  **H5:** The commercials cause frustration, by discrepancy between the featured world and the real one.

-  **H6:** The increased exposure to ads determine the trigger of more frequent purchasing requests, and the refuse to purchase the requested item leads to child's disappointment.

-  **H7:** The commercials determine the increase of the number of purchasing requests related to products from advertisements, the refusal being possible, which enhances the chance to be disappointed, and subsequently, frustrated.

-  **H8:** The commercials determine unhealthy habits in what concerns the nutrition.

Similarly to most of phenomena, within the link between the exposure to ads and the possible unintended determined effects there may also appear a series of factors diminishing to a certain extent the actual relation. Thus, in this case, concerning the children, the following factors may be taken into account: age, sex, the social-economical status and items related to the communication between parents and their children and concerning the real message sent by means of the advertisements.

CHAPTER 4

METODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

Methodology is an extremely part of each survey, creating a frame of reference for everything related to research design. The last one may be considered as the result of an unitary approach in what concerns the context where the research develops, the main question on which this is based, theoretical aspects involved, and of course the methodological part.

The methodology essence consists in the structure of the developed actions related to the problem taken into consideration, as well as the answer that is to be obtained (Jonker & Pennink, 2010).

Actually, it is impossible to start a research without identifying the real existing problem at the level of the studied community, the purpose itself of the survey being the obtaining of relevant results designed to offer the expected response.

The research method that is considered the most appropriate, given the actual conditions, is the sounding, this method being also the most spread in what concerns the quantitative research techniques.

The sounding on which the research is based is a structural, hidden one, a transversal and self-administered survey. The tool used within this research is the questionnaire. Due to the fact that, from the beginning we wanted to test and to improve the pattern conceived by Buijzen & Valkenburg (2003b), the questions from our instrument should have followed the same logical clue, but of course with certain modifications due to the lack of language and context, generally.

A very important stage for our survey was the questionnaire presentation. In the pilot phase we preset the questionnaire underlying this research, using two versions of the instrument, the difference being represented by the number of the answer versions. The preset was performed on a sample of 108 children, a second grade class and a eighth grade class, for each suggested version.

After defining the final form of the questionnaire, this was applied either personally, where this thing was possible, or by the operators (education counsellors, teachers) that received all instructions necessary for the best development of this activity.

The actual research aimed the approach of pupils from primary and middle school, except the pupils from the first grade classes, who, given their age and knowledge, could not be included.

This research aimed only the pupils from Cluj-Napoca municipality, the decision being taken by means of the involved costs.

In order to obtain an overview of the target population, we addressed to the School Inspectorate of Cluj County, requesting the data necessary for the research development.

In this research, we appeal to the random sounding within which there are “included those methods based on the sample formation patterns where the choice of the population unities is random, each unity having a known and nonzero probability to access within the sample” (Plăiaș et al., 2008, p.401).

The sampling method that we chose is represented by groups. In this context, we need to underline the representativeness of our sample, the sounding being exhaustive ($1693/11812=14, 33\%$). As we can see, the condition for having a sample equal or larger than one-seventh of the studied population (Pop, 2004) was checked. The number of schools entering in our sample was 25, while the number of classes where the research was applied was 70, 10 for each grade.

In the following, we intend to illustrate the structure of the sample from this research, underlining the assignment to classes.

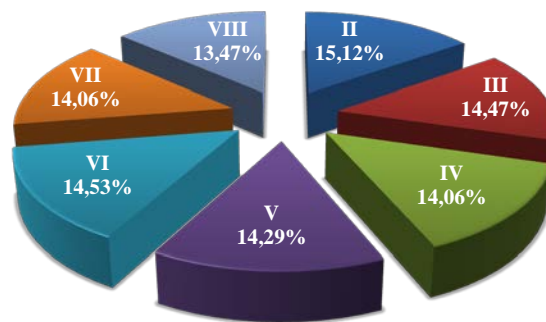


Figure 2: The structure diagram of the classes where children participating on this survey come from

Source: Made by the author

The empirical survey aims to develop the data collected from the questionnaire by means of the statistical processing, using the SPSS and AMOS software programs, version 20.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

The role of this chapter is to illustrate the results obtained, given the data analyse, in a way that highlights the research purpose and obviously that presents details related to the level of confirmation of the assumptions from the beginning.

First, the pattern was tested, taking into account only the group of age used for the reference research (8-12 years). After appropriating this version, the pattern was tested on the entire sample, taking into account the exceeding of the minimum requirement limits for the global indicators of creditworthiness.

Immediately, an additional version was introduced within the pattern: unhealthy nutrition habits, the integration of this version requiring additional checks, such as new relations between different versions, so that the obtained pattern be one of quality.

Another action taken was to take into account the importance of each item, in order to obtain averages that highlights as rightly as possible the situation of each version. Using the new data, we tested the pattern in view of checking its appropriation, as well as of highlighting the results comparatively, underlining the differences arising.

Another interesting aspect was to take into account the moderating variables: age, sex, communication between parent and child regarding the TV commercials, pointing out differences in certain relations.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main assumptions of our survey have been reasonably verified. In order to illustrate this situation in fact, we will synthetically present the results obtained in table 1.

Table 1: Centralization of the assumptions and of the results obtained

ASSUMPTIONS	CONCLUSIONS
H1: Exposure of children at TV ads leads to the accentuation of their materialistic notions (prior appreciation of goods and money in life).	✓
H2: The ads content on national TV channels is reflected in the increasing of the children's purchasing requests addressed to their parents, the chance of a conflict between a parent and his child being incremented.	✓
H3: The ads contribute to the intensification of the conflict between parents and their children.	-
H4: The ads determine materialism, which can subsequently turns into frustration.	✓
H5: The ads cause frustration, by discrepancy between the featured world and the real one.	-
H6: The increased exposure to ads determine the trigger of more frequent purchasing requests, and the refuse to purchase the requested item leads to child's disappointment.	✓
H7: The ads determine the increase of the number of purchasing requests related to products from advertisements, the refusal being possible, which enhances the chance to be disappointed, and subsequently, frustrated.	✓
H8: The ads determine unhealthy habits in what concerns the nutrition.	✓
✓ - confirmation of the hypothesis	- - rejection of the hypothesis

Source: Made by the author

Therefore, regarding **H1**, the influence of exposure to TV ads on the materialism degree at the level of children's beliefs has been confirmed. So, we can strongly assert that the TV ads contribute to the formation and development of certain materialistic beliefs and behaviours that are not favourable for a healthy mental development of children.

Regarding **H2**, our survey has reasonably underlined the influence of ads on the level of children's requests to purchase and to consume irrationally, the statistic results clearly arguing this relation and this harmful influence of ads on children's life and families. The excessive stimulation of children's request to purchase leads to family conflicts, determined by the parents' impossibility to face an avalanche of children's request to consume, which is stimulated by the TV ads. This way, we can underline the substantial confirmation of the hypothesis.

The results of our survey did not provide consistent support for the link between the children's exposure to TV ads and the family conflict, the hypothesis **H3** being, in these conditions, rejected. A possible reason to reject this hypothesis may be the fact that the parents were not questioned.

Hypothesis **H4** is supported by the results of our survey, the exposure to ads determining the children to become materialists, and, as we all know, the more we value the material goods and the money, the often the frustration feeling appears.

Concerning the children's frustration feeling after watching different TV ads, in the context of the present research, we are forced to reject hypothesis **H5**. The results obtained in this respect are quite surprising, signalling the presence of a significant, but negative link. We consider the result obtained a consequence of the fact that the assessment has not been performed immediately after the watching moment, while many other disruptive factors interceded.

Regarding **H6**, the ads exposure leads indirectly to disappointment in case of children. The presence of manifesting the influence of exposure to ads, by means of a purchasing request, is found upon the disappointment of pupils participating to this survey.







Hypothesis **H7** is also accepted within this presentation, the watching of TV ads increasing the frequency of manifesting the purchasing request, and as a result of a possible refusal, the disappointment is being installed, with the possibility to subsequently turn into frustration.

Our research confirmed the fact that the frequent exposure to TV ads defines a food style which is harmful to health, in this case hypothesis **H8** being assessed as positive.

The fact that most of the research assumptions were confirmed makes nothing but to strengthen the beliefs related to the effects of TV ads upon children, raising more concerns in this respect.

In what concerns the contribution in this respect, we outlined, as we previously mentioned, a series of precise recommendations processed in various directions, which can be noticed below (in the following paragraphs):

For the Government, the Parliament

-  Establishment of specialized structures which permanently verify the ads content before sending them to TV for diffusion
-  Imposition of certain restrictions in what concerns the ads related to the food consumption harmful to health
-  Modification of Law no. 272/2004 updated in 2012 regarding the Protection and the promotion of the children rights by completion of articles 87 and 89 with one more paragraph, which ensures the legal frame concerning the children protection against the negative effects of ads and the modality of their implementation
-  Modification of article 49 regarding the Children and Youth Protection from the Constitution of Romania, Chapter II, Fundamental rights and freedoms, in completion to another paragraph regarding the children protection against the negative effects of the ads
-  The introduction, within educational programs and homeroom classes, of certain materials aiming the ads perception in order to prevent the children manipulation
-  The support of the research related to the negative effects of the ads at least by the easier access of researches within the education units, and a more active collaboration between the researcher and the teacher staff. This way, even the perception on the phenomenon will be a real one, and not one taken from the researches performed in different other countries.

For parents





- Establishment of a committee within the National Federation of Parents Associations from the Pre-University Education which fight for the protection of children as consumers, by promoting certain legislative initiatives aiming the contribution to reduce the negative effects of the ads first related to the food consumption harmful to health
- The family communication must have a very important place, as the wrong management of a conflict is worse than the conflict itself
- The solution is not the prohibition of the ads, but the way of approaching and perceiving of the ads

For the academic environment

- The stimulation of the research related to the ads effects on children, by supporting the teacher staff in view of an easier access to the specialty literature, as well as to the database related to the studied population.
- The partnerships between the educational institutions involved and the possible associations or foundations interested in this matter, in order to establish some certain research environments.

For the teaching staff in pre-university education

What depends a lot on the way of approaching the ads effects, in schools also, is the education of the future adult. The frustrated child nowadays, the materialist child nowadays may become the future adult with serious behaviour problems.

-  The promotion of a more intense communication with parents and meetings between headmaster-parent-pupil where to promote the principles of healthy food consumption, trying in this way to counteract the negative effects of the ads.
-  A more efficient collaboration with the researchers is the benefit of both parties, including of the education act itself
-  It is preferable that teachers make the difference between a company trying to promote its products, and a survey performed in view of researching
-  Not to consider the research act as an abuse, as a classes disruptive, because this way they will convey this feeling to their pupils also, and this may distort the answers accuracy, while the reality itself may also become distorted.

For producers and distributors

Willing to gain as much ground as possible in what concerns the products marketing, we draw attention on the fact that, meanwhile, small consumers may become more and more demanding in terms of ads, and the producers may not be able to keep up with the level of the products quality and performance that are expected by consumers.

For the Federation of Non-Governmental Child Organisations and for other non-governmental organisations related to child's protection

The support and the promotion of children rights regarding their protection against the negative effects of ads

FUTURE RESEARCH LIMITS AND DIRECTIONS

In what concerns the **limits** of this research, these will be illustrated below:

- ↯ We consider insufficient the lack of information related to the family social-economical status, information that we should have naturally received from our parents, these not being part from our survey goal. Even though, the topic would have been ticklish, by requesting this kind of confidential information. We consider that these kinds of data within such research provides additional information in order to identify possible explanations related to the intensity of different effects taken into account.
- ↯ The research development only in Cluj-Napoca municipality. We have chosen this option, taking into account of the costs involved. We consider that the data obtained from several education centres may provide interesting comparative results. Additionally, the development of this kind of research in rural areas should not be disregarded.
- ↯ Considering the great number of samples and the existent budgetary limits, we did not have the chance to offer rewards to children participating to our research. The offer of small prizes is a common practice within this kind of surveys, increasing the motivation to take part to them.
- ↯ Due to the fact that the questionnaires have been completed in classrooms, a disadvantage was the lack of the same work conditions while filling the research instrument. The way of disposing different classrooms has aggravated the process itself.
- ↯ Another restricting aspect was the presence of the teacher staff when filling the questionnaires, a pretty annoying aspect for some pupils, all the more so within this action there were some questions regarding aspects directly related to school.

Regarding the **future research directions**:

- We consider it would be a great opportunity to repeat this survey, but this time in very different conditions. We refer here to the simultaneous application of the

questionnaires to smaller groups of pupils, in a place where they feel comfortable and where the confidentiality safety is guaranteed. Obviously, such survey would be more expensive, but it might be developed in partnership to an institution interested in turning into account the data obtained.

- As we already mentioned in the paragraphs emphasising the limits, we consider auspicious the development of a research of this kind in rural areas also.
- In order to obtain as consistent data as possible, an extremely plausible option is to perform a longitudinal survey that offers the possibility to collect consistent data, the eventual comparisons being particularly eloquent.
- Another possible direction would be the participation to an experimental survey, where younger age groups be taken into account, this type of survey being suitable for children also.

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