

Perspectives on *Ten-to-Twelve Years Old* Cognitive Processes Stimulated by Media Messages Reception and Attitudinal Changes Resulting from Gaining Media Competence

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Résumé : Les quatre dernières décennies de débats sur les compétences médiatiques du public ont déplacé l'accent du modèle de la réception passive des messages média, spécifique à l'approche behavioriste de réception, « *ce que les média font au gens* » vers le modèle de la réception active des média, créé sur l'approche usager, « *ce que les gens font avec les média* ». L'expérience acquise et le progrès des média ont démontré plus que jamais que les aspects concernant

les moyens employés par les média afin de s'insinuer dans notre maison, dans notre vie quotidienne représentent un problème qui implique la famille en tant qu'institution exigée par la législation et les normes de la société contemporaine, surtout quand il s'agit de se prononcer sur les règles selon lesquelles les enfants ont accès aux programmes télévisuels.

Mots-clés : attitude, compétence, éducation, média, processus

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*Perspectives sur le processus cognitifs stimulés par les messages
medias de réception de dix à onze ans : changements attitudinaux des
compétences médias gagnées*

Abstract: Last four decades' debate on public's media competencies has been shifting from the model of passive reception of media messages tackled from a behavioral approach "*what media do to people*", to the one favoring the active media reception, built on the functionalist way of evaluating, "*what people do with media*". Time and media progresses have made it clearer than ever before that aspects regarding the

way media have been "insinuating" in our living rooms, bedrooms and last but not least in our everyday life, is an issue involving the family as an "institution" required by society norms and legislation to have a say in the way viewing rules are built and applied when children are around TV.

Keywords: attitude, competence, education, media, process

Introduction

According to several researches in the EU Member States, 9-12 years old viewing practices are estimated in terms of 1500 hours/year, while the same category of children spend 850 hours/year in school and merely 50 hours/year with their parents (Frau Meigs, D., 2006).

Our experiment in brief terms

Due to the above mentioned context and also due to the fact that 9-12 years old have a considerable quantitative, *behavioristic and hedonistic* linear media experience while still trusting adults and being in need to talk to their parents and teachers about what they hear and see on the screen in order to reduce negative media effects on their physical, moral and mental development and build an identity that is not imposed on them by media models, a research was initiated.

The basic purpose of the experiment unfolded on two 10-12 years old groups (a control group and an experiment group) was to explore the way cognitive aspects in media programs, mostly television ones, shown to subjects in the experiment group by means of a media counselling guide led to attitude changes regarding the way these subjects relate to their teachers, their family and their peers, or even to people that are strongly stereotyped by the media, such as: representatives of ethnic minorities, poor people versus rich people, foreigners in Romania, foreigners met abroad, people in need also. These attitude changes were further compared to those of the subjects in the control group that did not receive any counselling on media concepts. The data were collected out of an eleven-item questionnaire that all 316 subjects answered, irrespective of the control or experiment group they belonged to. Those in the control group answered first. Then, the subjects in the experiment group were introduced to media concepts by means of a media guide on paper accompanied by short significant examples from TV programs, that illustrated those concepts in a Power Point Presentation.

The results of the research may be interpreted as important issues to be further regulated by media policies and also as topics welcomed for discussion between 10-12 years old and their parents and teachers as part of education policies.

Some theoretical aspects

The theoretical aspects we had in mind before initiating our qualitative research were two fold:

- On the one hand, we had in mind a comparison between the process and the elements of the mediated and the non-mediated communication, a key note importance being placed on feed-back issues from the point of view of the educational implications of media messages outside formal education and inside formal education,

- On the other hand, media content, analyzed under the perspectives of media concepts such as all media are produced by specialized institutions, media use special audiovisual means in order to convey meaning, media use special representations in order to build their messages, and last but not least media target more than even before specialized audiences.

We initiated an analysis of mediated / non-mediated communication processes and placed an important accent on feed-back – which is so vague and faint in the mediated communication – and, - so strong in the direct/non-mediated one - adding educational value to the feed-back of direct communication during discussions between children and teachers and/or parents about media issues, such as:

- media constructed reality in news programs,
- the role of loud music in creating suspense, or that played by lights/special effects in conveying certain meanings to the public or even those regarding,
- the way 10-12 years old perceive themselves as public of media programs they watch.

Our research hypothesized that feed-back and feed-forward that formal or even non-formal educational communication about media issues may provide to 10-12 years old may help them to become becoming media literate, with large benefits for the way they build their identity and they understand everydaylife and „life on screens”. Then we went further, from the media communication seen in terms of a process to content, i.e. media content. We paid special attention to media content and to the way 10-12 years old understand and build meaning out of it that they use in order to create their own identity, no matter how disregarded media content generally is by scholars and teachers and no matter how seldom media topics are debated in school. Taking into account the two major schools, when it comes to media content (i.e. the Frankfurt School and the Birmingham School) we had in mind while looking at our subjects’ answers, the fact that some media texts, such as movies, tv series, even soap operas may be considered open media texts allowing for various interpretations, while news, sports, weather forecasts may be grouped under the closed media texts leaving room for some interpretation but not a very generous one. Under the relatively closed texts fell some media texts with an educational content, such as the ones on thematic channels: Discovery Channels, Animal Planet, National Geographic, Da Vinci also. While the process part dedicated to communication elements, esp. feed-back, feed-forward was placed by us under quantitative analysis and the one on content and children’s building meaning about media content, under a qualitative analysis, our interest for media content, in itself, was concentrated in a chapter dedicated to the training of trainers (students that decided to become teachers as well as language and humanities teachers). This media content chapter reunites media key concepts, methods and strategies to be used in class in order to teach media and to stimulate 10-12 years old to look for and to use media content in their school – projects/homeworks.

Defining our experiment in terms of technical choices

For the purpose of our research we decided to use the natural, before hand projected, mental, simultaneous, active experiment.

Which is which and why

We called our experiment a *natural experiment*, because the pupils, our 316 subjects, were asked to answer a questionnaire in school, under their normal educational conditions, not under laboratory built conditions.

It was also called *before hand projected*, because the research focused on some issues, the situation investigated being created by the research objectives that meant to stimulate pupils' reactions to the topics in a questionnaire, it did not mean to analyze processes unfolding independent of the research purpose.

We also thought that our experiment was a *mental one*, because it resorted mainly to pupils' media experience gathered outside school, even long before becoming school pupils, while home media viewing, since it started from their media programs observation, and by further resorting to children's imagination extended the power of observation, beyond its usual limits of access in order to help them answer the questionnaire.

Besides, we dealt in our research with a *simultaneous experiment* since results of the pupils in the experiment group were compared in a transversal way with the results in the control group, i.e. they were not analyzed successively.

Last but not least, our experiment was an *active one*, because variables were manipulated by the researcher under natural conditions, i.e. during the experiment, while pupils were in their classrooms.

Hypothetical grounds of the experiment

In order to unfold our experiment we decided to start from the following *hypothesis*:

- 10-12 y. o. who study media in school will be more inclined to choose media for educational purposes than those who are not media competent/ media literate,
- 10-12 y. o. who discuss with their parents, their teachers, their friends about media programs have a better understanding of the media literacy concept, "*production*" and *make a clearer difference between media reality in news programs and reality outside media*,
- 10-12 y. o. who *discuss with their parents, their teachers, their friends media programs are less influenced* by the media and have a better relationship with school, family members and peers,
- 10-12 y. o. who *discuss with their parents, their teachers, their friends media programs are less subject to media negative effects*.

What dependable and independent variables suit the purpose of our experiment

The dependent variable in our research was the questionnaire made from 11 items, to which answered the pupils/subjects in both groups.

The independent variable was a media guide made from:

- a verbal presentation provided in our case by the researcher herself,
- a paper leaflet focusing on 10-12 years old increasing awareness regarding the fact that they watch by themselves programs that may not be dedicated to them and that they should talk to their parents and to their teachers about scenes that affected them in a negative way and
- a fourteen-minute Power Point Presentation focused on media concepts, illustrated by brief videos.

The independent variable, a media literacy sort of guide was provided only to pupils in the experiment group, who were first introduced to media key issues and then were asked to answer the questionnaire.

The operational chart of the questionnaire

The questionnaire answered by children in both groups focused on the following cognitive aspects, in so far as 10-12 years old media literacy experience can provide:

- how much do they credit *news programs to reflect reality* and to be relevant in terms of what is really important on every day basis experience,
- *how important music, light, colors and special effects in media programs are in helping them understand media messages better,*
- *how much they perceive themselves as public of the programs they watch with or without their family*
- *how much use they make of media content in order to prepare their homework.*

The issues in the questionnaire regarding the influence of media messages upon 10-12 years old attitudes focused on their way of *relating towards school and teachers, parents and other adult relatives in their families, peers, colleagues, representatives of national ethnic minorities, rich/poor people, young/old, foreigners met in Romania or abroad, persons in need for healthy (other) reasons.*

- both our questionnaire and our media guide focused on media key concepts which were considered by us cognitive variables in our research and,

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- the way 10-12 y. o. think that media influence or not, the way they relate to their family, their school, their peers, were the attitude variables in our research.

Taking into account the fact that there is a significant difference between children living in rural areas and children living in urban areas from the point of view of access to media content, media consumption and from the point of view of media program diversity, we considered it relevant to initiate our research on children living in Bucharest, which is the capital of Romania and provides the richest media offer in terms of access possibilities and media content diversity.

The sampling procedure

So the sample group was made from children living in an urban area, both rich in terms of media content and in population, since at present it has been estimated that Bucharest has a population of 2 million inhabitants.

The sample group has been built by means of the statistical simple sampling technique of choosing the first one in every ten schools (1/10 statistical simple sampling step) in Bucharest, and then one in every 10 pupils, aged 10-12 years old from the schools mentioned above.

Our sample group was made from 316 pupils aged 10-12 years old was split into two:

- An experiment group of pupils made from 85 girls and 73 boys
- A control group made from 83 girls and 75 boys.

In order to decide where each pupil will take part in the experiment, i.e. as part of the control group or of the experiment group, we chose to take into account their marks in Romanian language, as a proof of their proficiency in understanding what they read, see and hear while watching tv.

In order to have the all types of students, with similar communication performance in the mother tongue in both groups we chose to split each two pupils with the same mark into different groups.

Results of Media Education in terms of cognitive impact

In the experiment group, the results showed that the media guide exerted major cognitive influences upon pupils as follows:

- 65 % - media languages concept (special sounds, images, colors special effects used by media in order to convey meaning) *in the sense that media languages help them to understand media messages better*
- 54% - media programs are considered useful for learning scientific information
- 44 % - media programs are considered useful for learning foreign languages
- 43 % - self-evaluation and self - perception made by the 10-12 y. o. who perceive themselves as public of television programs, as a result of the explanations provided by the media guide, especially the one on paper

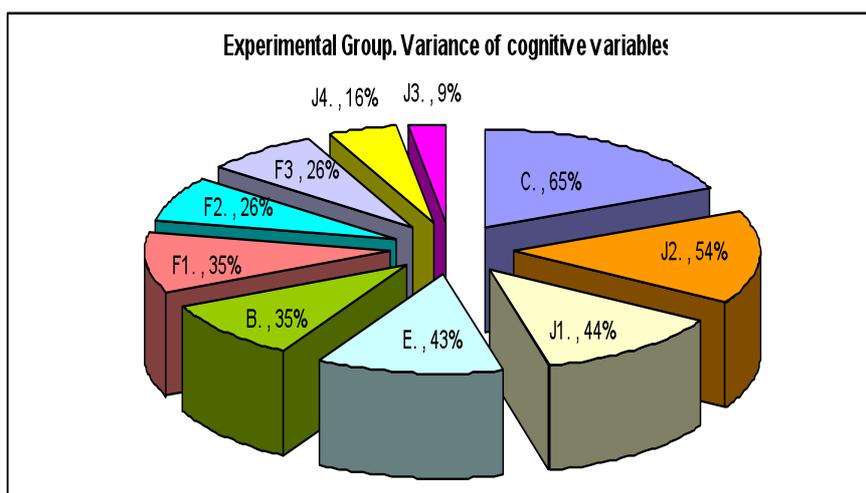


Figure 1: Experimental group: major influences of the media guide upon cognitive variables

Results of Media Education in terms of impact on attitude changes

- 77% the customs of watching tv programs at home were influenced by the media guide in the sense that pupils in the experiment group answered the questionnaire on this topic and said that they watch tv programs with their families,

unlike those in the control group who answered that they watch tv mostly on their own.

- 65 % the media guide influences 10-12 y. o. attitudes towards the way they relate to persons under difficult situations, altruism being highly stimulated by media emotional presentations in news, currents affairs programs

- 59 % the media guide influences the attitudes towards the way 10-12 y. o. relate to persons belonging to national ethnic minorities in Romania in the sense of not being influenced by media stereotypes

- 48 % the media guide influences the attitudes towards the way 10-12 y. o. relate to their colleagues who have good marks in school who are not very often presented in the media, unlike the cases where children having committed offences, who are often present in news programs... and thus become famous, despite the reason that brought them to fame.

In the experiment group, the results showed that the media guide exerted major influences upon pupils attitudes as follows:

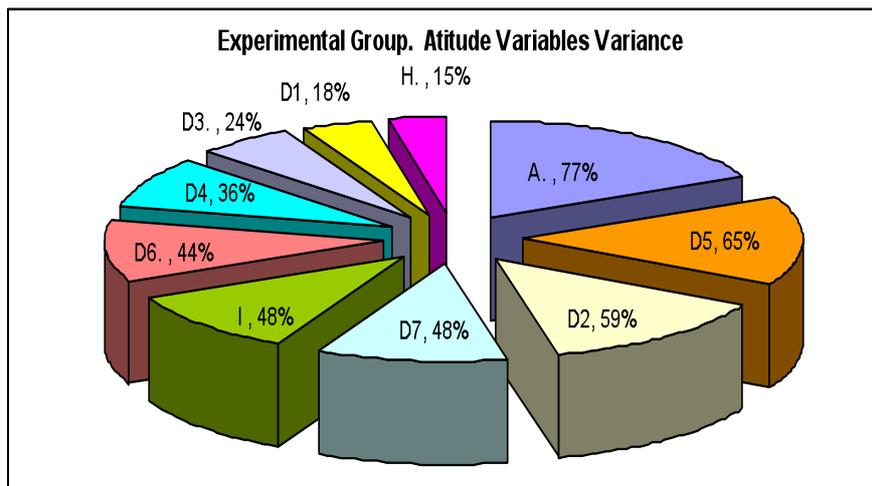


Figure 2: *Experimental group. Attitude Variables Variance*

Compared results provided by an analysis of the variables' frequency in the experiment group and in the control group proved in general terms and figures that empowering 10-12 years old to understand media by can be worth while in terms of cognitive gains for them - be it merely for the sake of children's social experience or for educational purposes – and also in terms of positive attitude changes if it is hosted by direct formal or non-formal debate between adults and children.

With major cognitive items:

- The most significant difference between the choices made by pupils in the control group and those in the experiment group was 41%. Boys in the experiment group chose to answer that *“not everything they see in news bulletins is real”*, while only 5% of those in the control group chose this answer, too,
- 29%, the second significant difference is that between the girls in the experiment group who answered that *music, lights, colors and special effects help them to better understand media programs*, compared to the answers of girls in the control group,
- 27%, third significant difference between the 30% answers of the girls in the experiment group stating that *the tv programs they watch are not dedicated to them* compared to the 3% of the girls in the control group, that chose the same answer,
- Last, not least a 21% difference between boys in the experiment group that 28% chose that *they talk to their family about TV programs*, while only 7% of the control group chose the same answer.

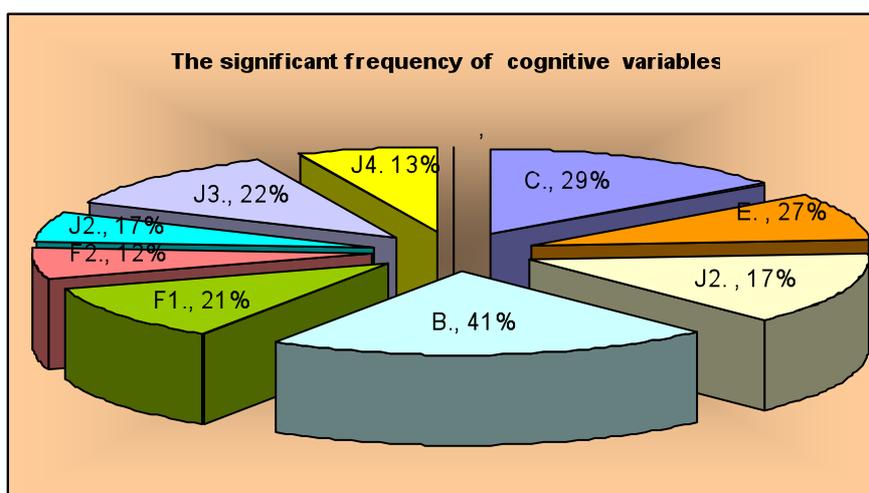


Figure 3: The significant frequency of cognitive variables

With major attitude items:

- The most significant difference, 44%, was between the answers of the girls in the experiment group that, chose to answer in 53% that *tv programs have a negative*

influence upon their relationship with their families, while girls in the control group made the same choice only in 9%.

- 41%, was the difference between the answers of the boys in the experiment group, who answered that (65%) *tv. programs exert a bad influence upon their relationship with school*, unlike those in the control group, that chose to answer in the same way in 24%.

- 35%, third significant difference, girls in the experiment group (49%) answered that *tv. programs exert a bad influence upon their relationship with peers*, while only 14% in the control group chose the same answer.

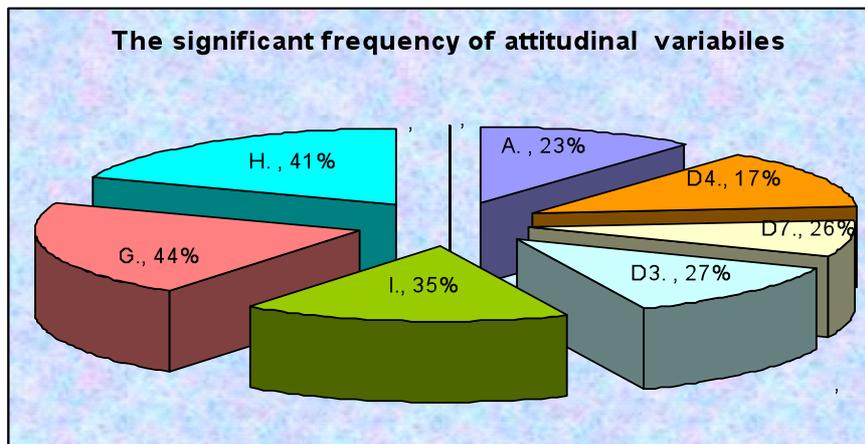


Figure 4: *The significant frequency of attitudinal variables*

Conclusions and possible ways onward...

As we mentioned at the very beginning of our research, Media Education for gymnasium pupils, whether unfolding outside school or in school, as part of communication topics, such as languages, or of social sciences ones, or even of the vocational one, or even as an independent subject is a key issue in:

- building stronger communication bridges between parents, teachers and children while watching and talking about media content,
- diminishing media content negative effects...
- which will hopefully bring us together as generations, not split us apart, due to lack of digital literacy as some late studies fear things may happen.

Since the present research has provided a wide frame for investigating media reception phenomena as well as for the educational implications such phenomena stimulates at cognitive and attitude levels, any of its results may be a starting point for further and deeper investigations. Any of the media principles mentioned in the chapter dedicated to the training of trainers (media production, media languages, media representations, media public) which have also been presented to the pupils in the experiment group under the format of a media guide may be the starting point of small scale school projects, where 10-12 years old may analyze by means of analytical or practical methods the educational values in various advertising spots dedicated to children and teenagers. By reducing the gap between school values and everyday life, such small scale projects may stimulate children to study in a more pragmatic way, developing their media competence and making them more aware of the way media exerts subtle influence on their cognitive and attitude development. For the purpose of the present research, we find it appropriate to suggest starting such small scale projects within the frame work of formal education, during the classes dedicated to communication, languages, social sciences. The project may start from a topic linked to a certain lesson and may unfold by resorting to audiovisual materials, where pupils may play special parts in editing, production of audiovisual materials either selected from what media provides or even better, by creating their own audiovisual materials.

The significant advantage of the method chosen for this research - the experiment - due to the fact that each moment is described and planned in detail, it may be easily repeated after a certain period of time , thus providing the opportunity to compare results from other experiments made under the same precise conditions. This way the theories previously tested may be revalidated or may be altered in such a way as to promote media reception for the purpose of protecting and empowering children and teenagers so as to build a strong identity as unbiased as possible by media models.

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