

IMPACT OF REFERENCE GROUPS ON THE TEENAGERS' BUYING PROCESS OF CLOTHING IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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Abstract

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The main objective of our research was to suggest recommendations for Czech producers of clothing for brand building and marketing communication strategies with Czech consumers in age group 13 to 19 years, therefore, our goal was to analyze consumer behavior of Czech youth when buying and using clothing and to analyze factors influencing their behavior, with the emphasis on reference groups and these results are presented in this paper. The target group (consumers 13–19 years old) was selected because it's often been neglected in recent marketing researches. The research consisted of primarily qualitative research (n = 96) in the form of in-depth interviews and pilot quantitative research (n = 200) in a form of online survey. The data collection was conducted in time period March 17–April 22, 2011. On the basis of data analysis, authors suggested general recommendations for improving marketing communication strategy of fashion producers in the Czech Republic. The results hint differences in the buying behavior of clothing between respondents in the age 13–15 and 16–19 years. The group of 13–15 years old teenagers doesn't consider clothing brands as a very important criterion when choosing particular piece of clothing, while for the older group brands matter. The 16–19 year old ones are significantly more influenced by their friends and opinion leaders, while for the younger group this influence comes not from their peers, but mostly parents.

buying process, clothing, Czech Republic, reference groups, teenagers, qualitative research

Specific features of teenagers' decision making and buying process have been examined internationally in numerous researches (e.g. Tárkányi and László, 2009). Few studies related to the buying process and reference groups were done in the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, we still miss a research study that would deal with more and more attractive segment of the clothing market in the Czech Republic. This segment of the market constitutes of adolescents in the age of 13–19 years. This is the target group that, according to literature (e. g. Hawkins, Best and Coney, 1989), tends to be quite impressible by reference groups. Marketers should be better informed about this market segment, they need to understand the impact of reference groups on the buying process in order to build a successful brand, increase sales and be more competitive. Most

authors divide the buying decision process into five stages: 1. problem recognition, 2. information search, 3. evaluation of alternatives, 4. purchase decision, and 5. postpurchase behavior (e.g. Bártová, Bárta and Koudelka, 2007; Kotler, 2000).

Adolescents might be very attractive market for clothing producers for many reasons. In many cases they have certain budget and spend their money on purchasing clothes as independent customers, and they also seem to have significant influence on decision making process of their parents. Teenagers create special group among other consumers due to several facts. Firstly, they tend to be very responsive to emotional stimulations. They do not have enough experiences and, thus, they can easily confuse reality and fiction. Differences exist of course in particular age groups. Adolescents in the target group 13–18

years old are the most impressible by advertisement. They are in the age when they create their consumer habits. These habits can lead to brand loyalty. In this stage, young people become self-conscious, they pick offered values and imitate behavior and lifestyle of their role models (Vysekalová, 2004). Peer groups play in this stage special role as a reference point and often replace a family in the decision making and buying process. A very important difference between peer groups and family is the fact that family is given and adolescents are forced to obey, while peer groups are chosen and featured by reciprocity. Consumer learning is apparent in this specific age as researches among teenagers show (Tárkányi and László, 2009).

Schiffman and Kanuk (2004) point out that consumer behavior enables us to not only understand and predict what consumers purchase in the market, but also it explains why, where and how often they purchase certain products or services. They use and explain the term buying behavior as behavior by which consumers express themselves when searching, purchasing, using, evaluating and disposing of products and services. Consumers expect these products and services satisfy their needs.

Personal influences comprises of factors of individual character which are not connected to cognitive processes of an individual. Personal factors are for example age, life cycle, occupation, economic conditions, lifestyle and personality. Human needs change during a whole life. In each phase of our life it is often natural that we change our preferences concerning food, clothing, lifestyle, etc. (Kotler, 2000). Most authors suggest following four psychological factors: motivation, experience, attitudes, perception and beliefs. People have wide range of different needs. Needs can be either biogenic (hunger, thirst, discomfort) or psychogenic (need for recognition, esteem, belonging). Turčínková *et al.* (2007) explain that need becomes a motive when certain level of intensity is reached. In decision-making process there are always more motives involved.

Consumer behavior is also influenced by factors such as: reference groups, family, social roles and statuses. Bártoová, Bárta and Koudelka (2007) stress that family is the most important reference group which forms behavior of a buyer, other reference groups have influence on lifestyle, hobbies, fashion, etc. Opinion leaders have also high impact on buying decision. An opinion leader is an agent who is an active media user, he/she is usually better educated in given sector and is well-respected by others. Opinion leaders are often leaders only in particular subject/category (Vysekalová, 2004). Besides above mentioned categories of factors, authors mention cultural and situational factor as the ones with significant impact on consumer behavior (e.g. Hawkins, Best and Coney, 1989; Horská *et al.*, 2010).

A reference group is used by an individual as a framework of personal identification or to identify and/or classify others (Salmon, 2008). Groups that have direct influence on an individual are called as membership groups. Groups with indirect influence are then called as non-membership groups. Hawkins, Best and Coney (1989) conclude that most of us belong to a number of various groups and perhaps would like to belong to several others.

When we talk about the impact of reference groups on the consumption process, a very important process which takes place in a group setting is conformity. Conformity can be often understood as simple following crowd, not acting as an individual as unique person. Mowen (1990) uses Kiesler's definition and says that conformity is a change in behavior or belief toward a group as a result of real or imagined group pressure. There are two types of conformity: 1. compliance, where the person merely conforms to the wishes of the group without accepting the group's dictates, 2. private acceptance, where the person changes his/her beliefs in the direction of the group. Hawkins, Best and Coney (1989) agree that group influence is strongest when the use of product or brand is visible to the group. Reference group influence is used by marketers mainly in the field of advertising and personal selling.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

With regards to the problems comprising the influence of reference groups and given goals and due to lack of secondary data, the authors decided to elaborate primarily qualitative research in the form of in-depth interviews. This data collection (in time period March 17–April 22, 2011) was complemented with a pilot quantitative research in the form of online survey. The main advantage of qualitative research was the fact that author could explore problems and psychological processes leading to the buying behavior in more detail due to unstructured way of questioning, more time and individual approach. In-depth interviews also helped to get to know the target group 13–19 better and formulate clear questions for pilot quantitative survey in order to further explore possible trends and new obtained information on larger population (the same target group).

For study purposes authors divided the chosen target group 13–19 into two parts: 1. teenagers in the age from 13 to 15 years, 2. adolescents in the age from 16 to 19 years. In-depth interviews with respondents from the first group were conducted in two elementary schools in Brno. The second part was conducted in two secondary schools in Brno. Schools were chosen from the register of schools provided by Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. Authors assigned each elementary school a number. With the help of generator of random numbers, the authors chose five schools. First two elementary schools which were willing to participate

in this research were selected. The same system was applied to the selection of secondary schools.

In the two elementary schools from each year (7th grade, 8th grade and 9th grade) were chosen four students of each gender based on random numbers. Total number of students from elementary schools representing the age group 13–15 involved in in-depth interviews was 48. At the secondary schools, the selection process was the same with one modification. From each class were chosen three students of each gender group (1st year, 2nd year, 3rd year, 4th year), again 48 students in total representing the second examined group 16–19. To sum it up, 96 students in the target group 13–19 participated in the qualitative research representing equally both genders.

During the in-depth interviews there were present always three persons – one of the authors (moderator), a recorder and a student (interviewee). The reason for conducting individual interviews was the fact the authors wanted to avoid conform pressures and shyness when speaking about confidential and sensitive information. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes and was conducted at respective school in calm and separated environment. In the interview protocol, semi-structured system of open questions was used avoiding simple answers “yes” or “no”. Some questions were formulated as direct, some of them as indirect.

The pilot quantitative research was elaborated only as supporting, thus, number of respondents involved in this kind of research is adequate. Questionnaire was sent to 290 students representing the target group 13–19. First two hundred of filled e-forms were included to the research. For distribution of e-forms was used viral marketing via social networks. Structure of respondents was following: 51% males (102 respondents) and 49% females (98 respondents). The questionnaire was pretested on a sample.

RESULTS

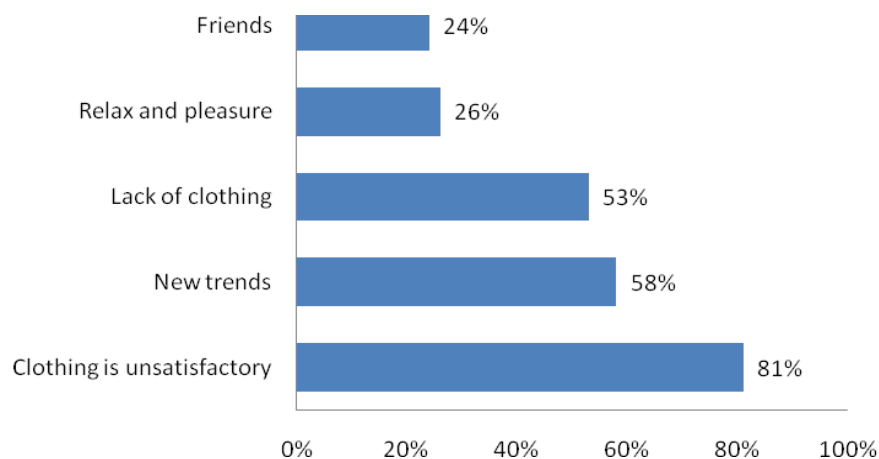
Results will be presented in a framework of 5 phases of consumer buying process, as suggested by authors mentioned above.

Problem recognition

During in-depth interviews several reasons leading to the purchase of new clothing were discovered. Most often respondents agreed that they buy new clothes in such cases when their current clothing is already unsatisfactory. Interviewees were consequently asked what they understand as “unsatisfactory”. They provided following explanations: the clothes no longer fit, the size too small, clothing is defective or out of fashion. Number of them mentioned new fashion trends as a reason on its own. Interesting is that many of them mentioned friends as reference points. Respondents also agreed that they are forced to shop when they have lack of required, desired or appropriate clothing (clothing for certain events). Further, it was identified that target group 13–19 is motivated for shopping of clothing on the basis of social interaction (meeting with friends, new people), fun and relax.

In the Fig. 1 we can see results from the pilot online survey, suggesting the distribution of frequencies of motives in target group. Respondents could check up to three options. In the quantitative research, friends are placed as last factor leading to a purchase of new clothing, while within interviews students were often talking about friends as an inspiration and stimulus for buying new clothes. This interesting dissonance occurred, authors assume, due to different interpretation of the term friends in the context of available options in the questionnaire (despite pretest).

Interviewees from the age of 13 to 15 years expressed they use only little information about current clothing from advertisements and they



1: Most common reasons for purchase of new clothing

Source: Pilot online questionnaire survey, April 2011, n = 200

have, in general, negative attitudes towards commercials. One 13 years old boy said *I do not care about commercials, I do not believe them*. This group (13–15) interacts the most within a class, individuals tend to be often inspired by their classmates (friends).

The second group (16–19) seems to be more open towards advertisements in general. In addition, they tend to be picky and differentiate themselves from others. Moreover, they often search for inspiration in their vicinity. In this group, friends do not come out so predominantly from their classes. Aspiration reference groups play important role in the first phase of purchase decision-making process. In the interviews it was discovered that the desire for new clothing often results from changing conditions related to consumer's lifestyle preferences and own style. The group of 16 to 19-year-old ones participates in higher number of social groups in comparison to the group 13–15. Therefore, they meet with various influences and social demands.

Information search

Interviewees were asked where they get information concerning new clothing and they came up with these information sources (arranged according to frequencies within interviews): 1. shopping centers; 2. friends; 3. specialized shops; 4. mail order catalogues; 5. Facebook; 6. Internet (e-shops, web presentations of clothing brands, search engines); 7. family; 8. leaflets / flyers; 9. Internet blogs. Not so numerous were: magazines, celebrities in TV shows and movies.

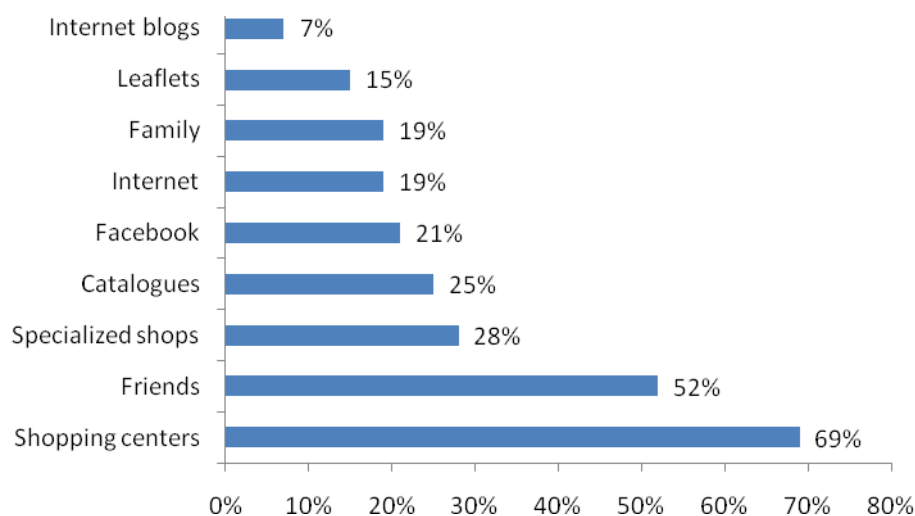
In the Fig. 2 are presented results to a question: *Where do you get information concerning new clothing?* Respondents could check up to three options. Also the online survey confirmed shopping centers as the most popular source when searching for information about new clothing. They seem to serve as source of inspiration. Students were explaining

that when they search for new fashion trends or clothing in general they often visit shopping centers to see what is new. This shows how good merchandising may play an important role in store's sales.

It is interesting to see that friends as reference group are placed on the second position. Interviewees agreed that they often start search for new trends and new clothing after they find friend's particular clothing to be cool and attractive. They also tend to accept recommendations and opinions from their friends concerning what place of purchase or clothing brand is good or not. Another interesting fact is that target group 13–19 seems to use Internet rarely when searching for information about new clothing in spite of Internet popularity among adolescents.

About 60% of interviewees noted that they discuss clothing and style in a class from time to time. From interviews it is apparent that the target group 13–19 has confidence as for the own style of clothing and opinions in general. On average they answered that they take recommendations for the future purchase on the basis of either good or bad references of the peers. Most of their "friends", according to answers in interviews, recruit from their classmates. The age group 16–19 also often mentioned that they have good friends mainly from the neighborhoods. However, majority of them also answered that their friends come from the classes. Other circles were: hobby groups, sport clubs, and seldom their family were mentioned.

Facebook is a phenomenon of these days, the authors found it interesting to uncover how this social network is used within the information search stage. Respondents were answering a question how they use Facebook in order to get information concerning new fashion trends and clothing. 18-year-old male summarizes majority stand-point:



2: Sources of information about new clothing trends

Source: Pilot online questionnaire survey, April 2011, n = 200

On the wall I find daily many links and products that my friends like. A 19-year-old female student explained: When I am surfing on Facebook I bump into several ads and commercials. In addition, I am a fan of many different clothing brands and e-shops. A 15-year-old female student of elementary school emphasized: I am always on Facebook, I am discussing new stuff and clothing though the chat with my friends.

Another aspect which was observed during information search stage was attitude towards advertisements, covered in several questions. When asked: *Do you buy new clothing on the basis of advertisements?* interviewees automatically associated the term "advertisement" with TV commercials. About 80% of the group 13–15 answered that they do not buy clothing based on advertisements. In the second group 16–19, it was about 60%. However, in general, female respondents from both age groups were more open to buying new clothing based on advertisements.

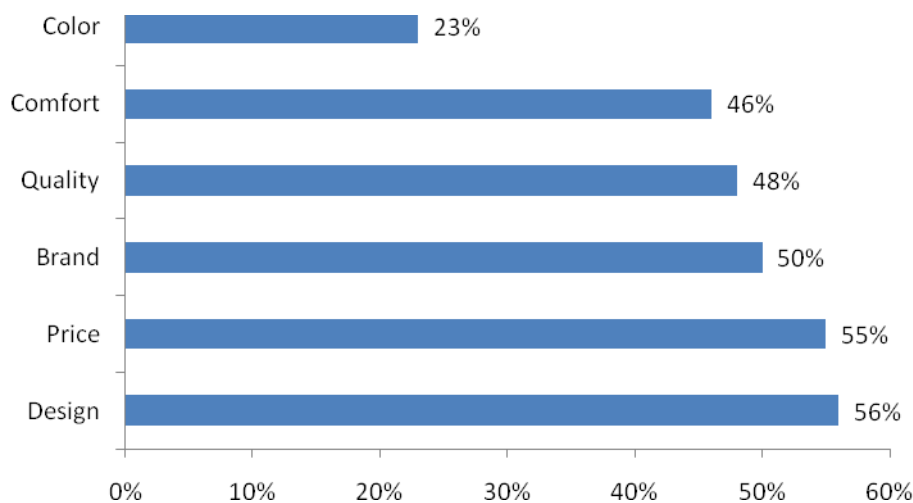
As for the elements of advertisement which teenagers do not like, we have to mention especially these: they do not like when the advertisement acts unreal, when the jokes are awkward, respondents do not like stereotypes and predictable pressure statements. When interviewees were asked what characters would entertain them the most in advertisement focused on clothing, respondents were mentioning characters such as famous sportsmen, singers, actors, dancers and famous animated characters. They rarely mentioned they would like to see specialists in advertisement, for example specialists from production of clothing or fashion designers. Common men placed as the second (as interviewees indicated). Teenagers were asked what they imagine under the term "common men". An example of general opinion represents a 17-year-old male student who said: *Common men are people just like us, these people act in advertisements naturally.* It was interesting to hear an opinion of one

18-years-old female student who was explaining that *It is easy for me to identify with common men; these people could be my friends.*

Alternative evaluation

What is important for you when choosing new clothing? was another question interviewees were to answer. Respondents provided several factors that were important for them when choosing particular clothing. Most frequently they mentioned these: price, quality, brand, originality, design, and colors. In addition, the target group emphasized that clothing should be comfortable and stressed the importance of suitable size of clothing. These most frequent answers were compared within the e-survey. Fig. 3 shows their relative occurrence among respondents (respondents could check up to three options).

We can see that all the provided factors mattered. This signifies that also clothing brands are important to teenagers. Thus, interviewees were asked to explain what clothing brand means to them. It was discovered that interviewees most often view a brand as a symbol of quality. A 14-year-old male student explained: *Clothing brand means quality.* Other frequent explanations were that brand was a symbol of prestige and social status. One 18-year-old female student summarized other general opinion, she said: *Clothing brand expresses lifestyle of a particular group, its interests and attitudes.* During in-depth interviews differences concerning the importance of brands were found when evaluating clothing. The group 13–15 almost unanimously suggested that a brand is not very important for them when considering particular clothing. On the other hand, the group 16–19 very often noted that a brand is important for them. As popular clothing brands among peer groups were mentioned the following ones: Adidas, Nike, Bershka, Converse, New Yorker, Tommy Hilfiger and DC.

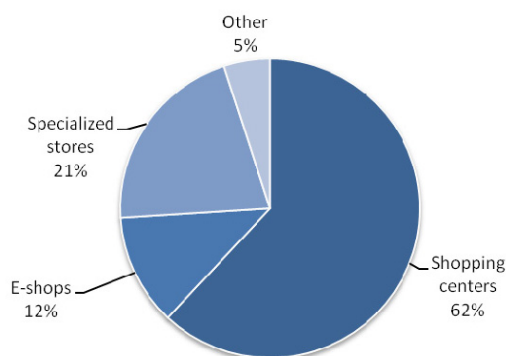


3: Important factors when choosing new clothing

Source: Pilot online questionnaire survey, April 2011, n = 200

Purchase decision

On the basis of responses from interviews authors created question for the e-survey which aimed to determine where teenagers buy their clothing in most cases.



4: Outlets where teenagers do their shopping for new clothing

Source: Pilot online questionnaire survey, April 2011, n = 200

Shopping centers (SC) – teenagers agreed that SC are preferred the most both as for the place of purchase of their new clothing and as a source of information. They regularly spend their free time in shopping centers. SC are not only place of purchase of new clothes, but also places of social contact where they meet up with their friends. One 16-year-old female student said: *I like that everything is so close and you have a large selection of many various shops with clothes.* Other frequent general opinion is highlighted by a 18-year-old male who noted: *I save lot of my time in shopping centers and often I bump into discounts in many shops.* What teenagers do not like about shopping centers is the fact that many people spend their time there just to pose with new expensive clothing. Some interviewees think personnel do not pay enough attention to customers because of lots of people around. In addition they pointed out that staff is not that skilled as in specialized stores.

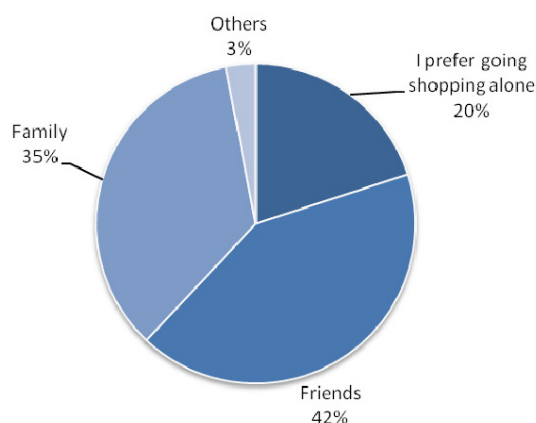
E-shops – interviewees like the comfort which this type of shopping offers. Moreover, they agreed that on Internet they can find the best prices and also they are not disturbed by other people in shops and by personnel. On the other hand, they miss the possibility to try offered clothing on and inspect materials. *I am always struggling with thoughts whether given clothes will be ok or not,* noted 16-year-old female respondent. Shoes were most frequently mentioned as the biggest problem when shopping on internet.

Specialized shops – teenagers like them because of specialized assortment. One 17-year-old skate fan explains: *I like the atmosphere of these shops and the fact that I meet people with similar lifestyle there.* It was also mentioned that staff in specialized stores is more skilled, because they deal with only one particular assortment. However, teenagers do not like the fact that in these stores they have to pay always

higher prices. *There are almost no discounts,* regretted a 15-year-old male, regular client of specialized stores. In addition adolescents highlighted that personnel in these stores often don't allow you to shop at rest. *I do not like when staff bothers me and constantly asks whether I want a help with something,* noted one 14-year-old male.

Authors, therefore, asked respondents what was their image of an ideal shop assistant. Teenagers concurred that a good shop assistant should be skilled, not intruding upon customers, should profess preferably the same lifestyle as the store customers. Another important aspect was that a good shop assistant should smile, act naturally and be nice to customers. In general, gender of shop assistant doesn't play role as long as s/he would meet the mentioned criteria.

Interviewees were asked what a specialized store should look like in order to make them enjoy the time spent shopping there. Teenagers pointed out that it depended on the specialization of such store; however, in general they suggested that it was the most important to display clothes properly in shop windows. One 19-year-old female respondent said: *If the shop does not look like good from the outside, I mean, if the right clothes are not properly displayed in shop window, then I am not interested in going inside.* In addition, teenagers think that goods should be properly displayed inside the store too and almost all interviewees mentioned that goods should be displayed in organized manner. Another aspect was the overall atmosphere given by the right music corresponding with the style of the shop and appropriate colors (mainly expressive). Interviewees liked crazy and distinct interiors.



5: The most common company when shopping

Source: online survey, April 2011, n = 200

Social influences play important role in the buying process. The Fig. 5 shows that 42% of respondents go shopping for new clothing with their friends. The younger teenagers (in the age group 13–15) shop more often with family members (35% of all respondents). In total, 20% of respondents prefer going shopping alone.

Postpurchase behavior

Based on interviews, authors came to the conclusion that on an average, teenagers are satisfied with their purchased clothes; however, answers differed a lot. The main goal of this question was to ascertain if adolescents experience cognitive dissonance often. One part of respondents answered that they reconsidered sometimes whether they made the right decision; on the other hand, the second part insisted that they did not think about it at all. A 14-year-old male respondent said: *Once I make my decision and buy some clothing, I never think about it if I made a wrong decision.*

Respondents were asked whether it could be caused by the fact that they did not pay for their new clothing. Those who did not pay with their own money for clothing admitted that it was the main reason. Many respondents mentioned that if they reconsidered whether they made the right decision and experience compunction then they probably bought either new shoes or too costly clothing in general. In general, it was discovered that female respondents in the target group 13–19 experience compunction after the purchase more often compared to male respondents.

Diffusion process

Do teenagers care about having new trends as first ones? If yes, what is behind this desire? These were the questions that authors wanted to know answers to. Majority of respondents answered that it was not important for them. During interviews it was discovered that the age group 16–19 aspires to be trendy and follows the latest fashion more often compared to respondents in the group 13–15. Female respondents across both age groups inclined more to new clothing trends when compared to male respondents.

The interviews suggest that the main rationale behind this desire is to build own image, become

original, and admired among peers. Female interviewees from the age group 16–19 also often noted they wanted males to lust for them. In addition, many teenagers within the interviews suggested indirectly that they wanted to be trendy to keep up with their aspiration groups. As aspiration groups, celebrities and various groups from their neighborhood were identified.

DISCUSSION

It is worth mentioning that no similar study concerning an influence of reference groups on the buying process of clothing in the target group 13–19 has been publically available for the Czech Republic. Few studies conversant with the analysis of buying behavior of teenagers on the Czech clothing market were written; however, these studies could not be used for extrapolation of any conclusion due to their obsolescence, incorrectly used methods of research or insufficient sample sizes.

On the basis of our existing findings we can determine what could be improved in future research. First of all, it would be desirable to pick up on this research by conducting quantitative research on larger population to compare results and back it up by qualitative research. Ideal sequence of methods would be following: qualitative, quantitative and qualitative. In addition, it would be appropriate to enrich the research by reference group “parents” and focus more on the yet unexplored group of teenagers in the age 13–15 and subsequently take into consideration parents as target group for marketing communication.

Moreover, within qualitative research also other techniques apart from in-depth interviews could be employed, such as: observation, experiments, focus groups, etc., however, carried out by skilled psychologists. These techniques were not used in this research because of time, capital and skills intensity that these methods require.

SUMMARY

Teenagers in the age group 13–15 years do not consider clothing brands as a very important criterion when choosing particular piece of clothing. Most often they buy new clothing in shopping centers with their parents. They have negative attitude towards advertising and do not tend to differentiate themselves by their style of clothing. Their friends come mainly from classmates. This group of teenagers is very impressible mainly by parents and their friends. Apart from strong influence of parents, they accept recommendations from opinion leaders (mostly classmates) provided that positive social climate in the class is present. It was ascertained that every class has approximately 1–3 opinion leaders.

We can conclude that marketers providing products for this target segment should aim their communication strategies at parents, because parents play the main role in their shopping. Advertising should, therefore, emphasize quality, price, comfort and safe factor of materials. Suggestions for marketing communication tools are: TV commercials, mail order catalogues, leaflets. The main goal is to create positive word-of-mouth among parents.

Teenagers in the age 16–19 years differ a lot on average in comparison to the previously described group. Clothing brands matter in this target group. Members of this segment have rather positive attitude towards advertising, provided it is done according to their preferences. Advertising focused on clothing should be funny, original, crazy, sexy, unpredictable and contradictory. Teenagers

emphasized that the content of advertising needs to be formulated in their language. Most often they buy new clothing in shopping centers with their friends who recruit from classmates or from their neighborhoods where they live. Shopping centers represent also the source of inspiration. Members of this age group are strongly impressible by their friends and opinion leaders. Opinion leaders come from their friends and from celebrities. Teenagers in this group put emphasis on individualism, they are structured according to various style of clothing which represents given lifestyle. The most popular style of clothing among teenagers (16–19) is fashion, trendy style (descants). This implies that adolescents like trying new fashion trends.

Marketing communications strategy of fashion producers can be conducted, for example, in these two ways. The first is classical way of advertising which seems effective for this target group. The first way comprises of TV commercials and billboards. The second way it is more challenging and could generate higher amount of new customers. Authors find as an effective tool word-of-mouth (WOM) including face-to-face WOM and e-WOM. Social networks (Facebook), social shopping, collective shopping and internet blogs (link-building) are the ways through which marketers can influence positive WOM. Fashion companies should rather focus on identification of opinion leaders from celebrities and e-bloggers. Authors find an opportunity especially in social shopping which is very popular abroad (mainly in USA), where this social trend of shopping involves millions of customers. In the Czech Republic, it is still unexplored realm of business.

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