

# The Ethicality of Immersive Sponsorship Within a Children’s Edutainment Centre

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**Abstract** In a shift away from traditional advertising, brands are increasingly embedding themselves into children’s lived experiences. Immersive brand placements within educational vehicles such as schools, textbooks and edutainment centres are worthy of an ethical examination as children may find it difficult to understand their persuasive intent. This study investigates the ethicality of immersive sponsorship within a children’s edutainment centre. Pre, post, and follow-up interviews were undertaken with 17 children and one of their parents who visited the heavily branded edutainment venue, Kidzania. Applying a deontological perspective, the results suggest that immersive sponsorship is inherently wrong, as children aged twelve and under are generally unable to determine the persuasive intent of the sponsoring brands. Embedded within an educational and entertaining setting, the children engaged with the brands in a very positive light, unaware of persuasive intentions and unable to apply a cognitive defence. In contrast, the vast majority of parents perceived the immersive sponsorships to be ethical. Those who applied a relativist argument saw the act as ethical in the cultural context of our contemporary and commercialised world, and specifically the city of Dubai. In contrast, those who applied the utilitarian approach argued that the act was a form of corporate social responsibility, producing a net benefit for society by helping to fund and run a realistic educational experience, and increasing the confidence of the child participants. While the opposing conclusions make it difficult to provide clear policy guidance, one recommendation is to focus on advancing the marketing literacy of children.

**Keywords** Immersive sponsorship · Children · Ethical perspectives · Edutainment · Persuasive intent

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## Introduction

The ethicality of marketing communications directed at children has been the subject of much debate. Policy has generally focused on protecting children from the potential harm that exposure to certain types of advertising may encourage (Owen et al. 2013). The typical aim is to protect children from sexualised, frightening and violent content, and those that promote an inactive or unhealthy lifestyle. Another ethical concern regards the “fairness” of targeting children when they may not be capable of understanding the purpose of marketing communications (Garde 2011). As brands move away from traditional television advertising, they are increasingly embedding themselves into children’s experiences in other ways (Linn and Golin 2006). These include brand placements within educational vehicles such as schools, textbooks and edutainment centres. When brands are embedded within an educational context, children may find it even more difficult to understand the persuasive intent of the marketing communications. The ethicality of this form of promoting to children is the focus of this chapter, specifically in the context of a children’s edutainment centre.

## Children’s Understanding of the Persuasive Intent of Marketing Communications

Academic research has attempted to uncover the age when children become aware of the persuasive intent of television advertising (Chan 2000; Moses and Baldwin 2005; Wright et al. 2005). Determining if awareness of persuasive intent exists is important to the ethicality argument, as without it, children are unable to apply a cognitive defence. If children cannot determine the persuasive purpose of advertising, then they are being deceived and can be easily manipulated. As a result children are especially vulnerable to advertising and are in need of protection. As such, governments and regulatory bodies around the world have either banned advertising to children (e.g. Sweden), or more commonly, applied some restrictions to it (e.g. Australia and Belgium) (Oates et al. 2002).

In a seminal study of persuasive intent, Robertson and Rossiter (1974) found that an understanding of the purpose of television advertising emerges at around eight years of age, and is further refined during the analytical stage of development (between the ages of seven and eleven) (John 1999). While ‘around eight’ is generally supported in the literature (e.g. Chan 2001; Roedder 1981), Oates et al. (2002) found only a quarter of eight year olds, and a third of 10 year olds, were capable of identifying the persuasive intent of television advertising. Similarly, Rozendaal et al. (2010) found that while an understanding of the persuasive intent of television advertising had emerged in children by eight, by twelve it was still not equivalent to an adult’s understanding. From a deontological perspective, these results imply that television advertisements targeting children of less than eight fail

a moral imperative, as they are inherently deceptive. As eight to 12 year olds have generally been found to have a basic understanding of the purpose of television advertising, but are still developing the cognitive skills necessary to fully comprehend persuasive intent, television advertising aimed at them is morally questionable.

While many researchers have examined children's awareness of the persuasive intent of television advertising, very few studies have investigated the more immersive forms of marketing communications. Given that television advertising is ubiquitous and contains distinct cues that allow viewers to easily distinguish between programming and advertising, it is intuitive to assume that children would find the persuasive intent of more embedded forms of marketing communications difficult to identify. The limited research that exists supports this assertion. For example, Owen et al. (2013) found children to have a significantly more sophisticated understanding of television advertising than product placement, product licensing, program sponsorship, and advergames. Similarly, Van Reijmersdal et al. (2012) found that seven to 12 year olds had difficulties in understanding the commercial nature and intent of advergames. In a study examining the sponsorship of a theme park, Grohs et al. (2012) found a rudimentary understanding of persuasive intent emerged in the 10 year olds, which appeared to be fully developed in those aged twelve. Applying the deontological perspective once again, these more immersive forms of marketing communications are also unethical when targeting children who are not yet capable of determining persuasive intent. The research supports the notion that this occurs at a later age than for television advertising, most likely at around twelve.

While researchers have begun to investigate the age at which children can identify the persuasive intent of the more immersive forms of marketing communications, no study to date has provided an in-depth examination of the ethicality of brands immersed within an educational vehicle. In a broad 'ethics in advertising' study, Triese et al. (1994) measured perceptions of ethicality from the general public's perspective. They found their sample to be particularly concerned about advertising in public schools, far more so than toward unhealthy food commercials targeting children. Given the public concern, the positive perceptions and trust we place in educational environments, combined with children's lack of cognitive defence and the immersive nature of the brand placements, makes the practice of integrating brands within an educational vehicle worthy of ethical examination. Thus, this study investigates the ethicality of immersive sponsorship within a children's edutainment centre.

## **The Edutainment Centre as a Sponsorship Vehicle**

The portmanteau 'edutainment' refers to the interactive pedagogy that converges learning with a fun and entertaining experience (Okan 2003). While interest in the convergence of education with entertainment has increased significantly with the explosion of new and interactive technologies (Addis 2005), over the past two

decades it has become an increasingly common marketing practice, and the subject of retail studies. For example, Feenstra et al. (2015) examined how child-oriented educational workshops and events conducted in-store by retailers create active, multi-sensory, social experiences. Whereas Creighton (1994) examined how theme-park style, heavily commercialised edutainment centres provided educational experiences designed to help children become ‘good consumers’ through play. It is a contemporary version of the latter, Kidzania, that provides the context of the current study.

Kidzania is positioned as an informal learning environment where children learn about adult occupations and responsibilities through playing ‘grown-ups’ and undertaking occupational and consumer tasks in a replica city (Baker 2014). A leader in the field, the firm currently operates 16 centres in 13 countries, with 24 expected to be operating in 21 countries later this year (Marsh and Bloom 2014; Kidzania 2015a). Within the Kidzania in Dubai, the extent of the sponsorship, and the immersion and engagement of the sponsoring brands is noteworthy. To enter the fantasy metropolis children are issued Emirates tickets and then board a replica Emirates airplane. Once inside the children can learn to be a kitchen hand at McDonalds, a factory worker in the Coca-Cola bottling plant, a courier for FedEx, a chocolatier in the Kinder Chocolate factory, a dentist with the assistance of Colgate, or a Doctor with the help of Dettol. For working in their chosen professions the children receive ‘KidZos’, the Kidzania currency, which they can deposit in their Al Hilal bank accounts, or spend at a number of real retail outlets within Kidzania. In fact, within the Dubai Kidzania children can take on any of 70 occupational roles including television presenter, police officer, and hairdresser, and experience interactions with over 35 real world brands including Sony, Kellogg’s, and Dunkin’ Donuts.

## Research Questions

In examining the ethicality of immersive sponsorship within a children’s edutainment centre we focused on two research questions:

1. Is immersive sponsorship within a children’s edutainment centre inherently unethical?
2. Do parents perceive immersive sponsorship within a children’s edutainment centre as unethical?

In addressing the first research question we have primarily adopted a deontological approach, attempting to ascertain whether this form of marketing communication is inherently right or wrong based on whether the children are deceived by the brand’s persuasive intent. As parents are the primary guardians of children and have a responsibility to protect them from harm, the second question aims to better understand their varying perspectives. As ethical determinations can vary depending on which ethical theory of moral philosophy is applied, deontological, relativist and utilitarian perspectives are discussed.

## Methodology

As part of a larger study investigating consumer socialisation within a marketer-sponsored children’s edutainment centre, pre, post, and follow-up interviews were undertaken with 17 children and one of their parents, who had never previously been to Kidzania. Pre and post interviews were conducted immediately prior to entering, and after exiting the venue, whereas the follow-up interviews took place approximately one week after the experience. While all 87 interviews were considered as data and analysed in NVIVO for the purpose of this study, the post and follow up interviews with the children were the most useful in determining an understanding of persuasive intent, whereas the pre and post interviews with the parents were most useful in determining their perceptions of ethicality.

As persuasive intent has been found to emerge at around eight for television advertising, and around twelve for more immersive forms of marketing communications, children aged between seven and twelve were recruited for this study. A demographic profile of the participants, including pseudonyms, is provided in Table 1. The author conducted pre, post and follow-up interviews with the ten children who were native English speakers and their respective parent. Student researchers who were native in Arabic conducted pre, post and follow-up interviews with the remaining children and their respective parent. To ensure the children’s interviews were suitable for their cognitive capacity, Peracchio and Mita’s (1991) guidelines were followed.

**Table 1** Demographic profile of participants

Child	Gender	Age	Native Language	Parent
Andrew	Male	7	English	Mother of Andrew
Danielle	Female	7	English	Mother of Danielle, Amy and Lizzie
Mohammed	Male	7	Arabic	Mother of Mohammed, Layla and Saif
Moza	Female	7	Arabic	Mother of Moza and Afra
Yoosuf	Male	7	English	Father of Yoosuf
Afra	Female	8	Arabic	Mother of Moza and Afra
Declan	Male	8	English	Mother of Declan
Jen	Female	8	English	Mother of Jen
Layla	Female	8	Arabic	Mother of Mohammed, Layla and Saif
Mel	Female	8	English	Mother of Mel
Miles	Male	8	English	Mother of Miles
Noura	Female	9	Arabic	Mother of Noura
Amy	Female	10	English	Mother of Danielle, Amy and Lizzie
Brian	Male	10	English	Mother of Brian
Lizzie	Female	11	English	Mother of Danielle, Amy and Lizzie
Saif	Male	11	Arabic	Mother of Mohammed, Layla and Saif
Shaima	Female	12	Arabic	Mother of Shaima

## Results and Discussion

### *Is Immersive Sponsorship Within a Children's Edutainment Centre Inherently Unethical?*

Persuasive intent is central to the argument that immersive sponsorship within a children's edutainment centre is inherently unethical. Academics have argued that if children are unable to understand the persuasive intent of the sponsors, then the practice is unethical, as children cannot enact a cognitive defence. While it could be argued that the marketers behind the sponsoring brands within Kidzania were not intending to persuade, but performing an act of social responsibility, this is certainly not in line with Kidzania's partner seeking web page which promises 'increased sales', 'long-term ROI', 'exposure', 'brand recognition' and 'loyalty' all in the first two sentences (Kidzania 2015b). Regardless of the intent, evidence suggests that implicitly acquired affective associations through engaging with brands in a fun and exciting environment do influence behaviour (Nairn and Fine 2008). The results of the larger consumer socialisation study support this, with a 34 % shift in brand preferences toward the sponsoring brands (see Arthur and Sherman (2015) for a full analysis). Therefore, even if the intent of the sponsorship was entirely well meaning, from a deontological perspective, it is not necessarily the understanding of persuasive intent that is important, but perhaps more accurately an understanding of persuasive capability.

Putting these semantic differences aside, the analysis revealed that while the children were very aware of the many brands that were present within Kidzania, their understanding of the sponsor's intentions and the communication's ability to persuade was weak. When probed, the children overwhelmingly attributed an assistive intent to the sponsoring brands, expressing that they were there to educate and entertain them. In this way the children viewed the brand placements in a very positive light: as fun, famous and there to inform them about potential occupations. Take the following quotes for example.

Lizzie: They were there because if you want to work in one of those brands, it's a learning experience.

Danielle: To tell you what you can do when you grow up.

Only two of the 17 children identified the persuasive intent of the brand sponsors, and neither of these was phrased in a manner to suggest that the children were executing a cognitive defence. Specifically Noura stated "[The brands help us] to learn how to work, order things, and when we grow up, we can go there and be customers", and Jen said "Because they want to make the company better, so more people come, so they can get more money". Given their relatively young age (nine and eight respectively), it was interesting that these two children were the only ones who identified the persuasive intent of the sponsors. None of the older children aged between ten and twelve exhibited any understanding of persuasive intent. Upon interviewing Jen's mother it became apparent that Jen's parents had deliberately

spoken to their daughter on a number of occasions about the purpose of marketing communications and the ‘tricks’ marketers apply. While Noura’s mother didn’t offer up any such explanation, the results do suggest an ability to identify the persuasive intent of sponsors within an immersive and educational setting may have more to do with education and discussions about the topic than age. It is also worth noting that the Kidzania experience did instigate a number of parent-child conversations about brands, which provided an avenue for parents to approach the topic if they felt it was appropriate.

In summary, in the children’s edutainment centre investigated, 15 of the 17 children could not identify the sponsoring brands’ intentions to persuade, but the vast majority could identify and understand the parallel educational and entertainment objectives. While all of the children were aware of the existence of sponsoring brands, their deep immersion into the educational and entertaining setting likely masked their persuasive capability and intent. As such, immersive sponsorship within a children’s edutainment centre is inherently unethical in that children are unaware of the persuasive intent of the sponsors and are being easily manipulated, as they are incapable of enabling a cognitive defence. While the harm caused by the sponsoring brands is by no means life threatening, the act itself should be considered as morally wrong.

### ***Do Parents Perceive Immersive Sponsorship Within a Children’s Edutainment Centre as Unethical?***

The parents’ initial perceptions of Kidzania were generally in line with the firm’s positioning. They perceived it as an interactive learning centre where their children would socialise while learning about and playing professions. Attitudes toward the sponsorship within the centre were rarely mentioned in the pre-interviews, and after probing were for the most part generic ‘wait and see’ statements. Upon leaving the centre, having been exposed to the brand sponsorships, their attitudes became increasingly specific and elaborate.

In contrast to our conclusion above where we found immersive sponsorship within a children’s edutainment centre to be inherently unethical, only one of the twelve parents adopted this particular deontological view. This parent, Mel’s mother, felt it was deceptive of the brands to promote the educational nature of the centre, when a persuasive intent was their primary purpose.

Mel’s Mother: I don’t like it in general... I don’t like this pushing of big brands and trying to make it look like it is educational... [They’re] just trying to brand it as educational, but actually what you have is just big brands pushing their own products.

Upon leaving the centre another parent was ‘slightly cynical’ of the sponsorship, and a third reported being shocked by the ‘in your face’ nature of the branded environment. However, neither of these attitudes led to a negative ethical evaluation. There was however one parent who provided an unethical evaluation of a

single component of the Kidzania experience. For Lizzie's mother, the exclusive inclusion of 'junk food' sponsors with no healthy alternatives was perceived as intrinsically unethical. Indeed, having children interact with brands that promote an unhealthy lifestyle, and providing no other food alternatives is morally wrong from a number of perspectives.

Interestingly, none of the parents identified the removal of the children from them as they undertook their various occupational roles and interacted with the brands as an ethical cause for concern. Depending on the activity, parents could generally look in on the children through a window to see what they were doing, but without being up close they couldn't hear or see the brand sponsored information that was being communicated.

It is perhaps less surprising, but still worth noting, that none of the parents identified the extremely structured play environment as a cause for concern. This line of moral reasoning has been argued by Linn (2013) and suggests the constant commercial pressures that children are exposed to inhibit them from creative play, an act essential to the development of creativity. Directed play in the form of electronic media, instructions, kits and in this case, occupational and consumer roles where children are shown only a single way to complete the task, hinders experimentation, inventiveness and creative problem solving. While no parents identified the issue, whether edutainment centres that focus on introducing and developing consumer and occupational roles in children are in effect taking away some of their childhood innocence, is worthy of consideration.

The vast majority of parents perceived the immersive sponsorship within the edutainment centre to be either entirely, or for the most part, ethical. Those who adopted the latter perspective generally applied a relativist lens. According to theory of relativism, no universal rules exist, and our normative beliefs are a function of our culture. Four of the parents applied this reasoning as to why they were ok with the brands immersing themselves in an educational environment and engaging with their children. Take the following quotes for example.

Yoosuf's father: I am in Dubai now. I kind of expect that kind of thing. It doesn't bother me. It's just there. It's there in the background. It doesn't bother me.

Brian's mother: You see them everywhere anyway, so they're just getting their marketing inside there... It's not a concern at all.

The remaining parents generally adopted a utilitarian perspective as to why the sponsorships were ethical. With utilitarian ethics, the 'end justifies the means', and in this case, the positive value the sponsors created by helping to fund an engaging educational facility was perceived to outweigh the negative act and potential negative consequences. The parents identified positive value as created in many different ways, the obvious being the education provided by the centre to their children. Specifically, they discussed how their children learnt about the world of work, the diversity of occupations, different occupational roles, local organisations, and financial literacy. A less obvious but even more frequently mentioned benefit to the children was the increase in confidence gained from speaking to a variety of strangers and performing a number of tasks they had never previously conducted.



Regardless of where they perceived the value to be gained, the majority of parents felt the brands were providing an act of corporate social responsibility. The parents rarely identified the persuasive intent of the brands; rather they perceived their purpose to not only help fund and provide an educational experience, but to do so in a more realistic manner than would otherwise be possible. Gratitude was often expressed in that the experience and venue would not be of the same standard without the realism and financial support that the sponsoring brands provided. Take the following quotes for example.

Miles' Mother: I actually quite like it, because I'm really big into social responsibility, I really think that it's a good thing. Now, whether it's subliminal marketing of their brand, which inevitably it would be, the fact that they're socially responsible enough to have a facility that people rave about in a more shopping sort of way, that kids can interact with and learn about, and do. For me, it's just fantastic! I think that, because it takes a lot of money and effort to set something like this up... whoever is behind it, they're companies that I'm more likely to shop with because of the fact that they care about education.

Declan's Mother: Having been to a similar place in Leeds, and obviously nothing was branded there, it's interesting, because I think the setup wasn't as good. I mean, here, I thought the setup was very good, everything worked. Whereas when we went to the one in Leeds, things didn't work, things had fallen off, and, again, the money wasn't obviously being put into it, whereas here everything is sort of spick and span and ready to go.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the utilitarian argument, that such centres play an essential economic function in society by matching needs and wants in the community and socialising children as consumers to sustain retail expenditure, was never mentioned.

## Conclusion

The results reveal that immersive sponsorship within a children's edutainment centre is inherently unethical. A deontological examination of the moral worth of the practice found the vast majority of seven to 12 year olds did not understand the persuasive intent of the sponsorships. Embedded within an educational and highly entertaining setting, the children engaged and interacted with the brands in a very positive light, unaware of their persuasive capabilities and unable to apply a cognitive defence. Based on this moral interpretation, policy makers should enact strict rules and regulations on immersive marketing communications targeted at children, particularly those that are embedded within educational vehicles, such as schools, textbooks and edutainment centres. Adopting a minimum age requirement of at least twelve for when immersive marketing campaigns can target children, and educating children who are approaching this age about the persuasive intent of advertisers so that they can apply a cognitive defence, seems appropriate.

In contrast, the vast majority of parents did not apply this deontological perspective and instead viewed the immersive sponsorship within a children's edutainment centre as ethical. These parents generally adopted either a relativist or

utilitarian view. The relativists perceived immersive sponsorship targeting children as ethical in the cultural context of our contemporary and commercialised world, and specifically within the city of Dubai. In contrast, those who applied the utilitarian approach to their ethical reasoning argued that the edutainment centre was a form of corporate social responsibility, producing a net benefit for society by helping to fund and run an educational experience, by providing a degree of realism to that experience, and by building confidence within the children. In stark juxtaposition to the earlier deontological conclusion, the parents' application of utilitarian and relativist theory reversed the moral outcome. These opposing views make it difficult to provide clear guidance to policy makers. However, if marketing communications targeting children continue to become increasingly immersive, one recommendation to minimise the potential harm would be to launch a program with the help of teachers and parents to advance the marketing literacy of children.

While the findings presented in this chapter further our understanding of the ethicality of immersive sponsorship within a children's edutainment centre, they are subject to certain limitations. First, while parents who had never previously been to Kidzania were recruited for the study, it is likely that parents who are morally opposed to sponsored edutainment centres, and were aware of the existence of brands within Kidzania, would have chosen not to subject their children to the experience, and would have been unmoved by the incentive of free admission. Second, the standard limitations of qualitative research do apply, and therefore to better assist policy makers, future studies should attempt to determine the age at which children generally become aware of the persuasive intent of immersive sponsorship by analysing a larger sample of children inclusive of teens.

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