THE ETHICS OF ADVERTISING? LET THE DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

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Abstract

In this paper it is argued that in the context of children's advertising -a generally agreed upon area for ethical concern since they are considered highly sensitive to advertisings influences- scientific studies have some challenges to face. For one, advertising literacy research aiming to empower children as to critically process advertising omits to take into account the children's point of view on advertising and them being targeted. The reason could be twofold: a domination of quantitative research and an underestimation of children's moral capacities. Secondly, the socio-economic backgrounds of the children are remarkably rarely considered. Yet on the one hand studies have shown interaction between advertising (attitudes, styles and products) and the socio-economic status (SES) of consumers. On the other hand, within highly consumerist societies it seems advisory to pay attention to those most vulnerably positioned and with the most problematized participation opportunities: children coming from families with a low SES.

Keywords

Advertising ethics – low SES children – qualitative research

1. Ethics' centrality to advertising

For some advertising is one of the mechanisms instigating and guiding *life politics* with spare time and effort left for ethical consideration of and moral obligation and responsibility towards others. It is central to the *liquid* modern consumption society where there is little to win out of the relationships with others and, in creating desires and needs through means of seduction it causes human behavior to become ever more individualized (Bauman, 2008). Advertising ethics in this line of thinking summons remarks as the *ultimate oxymoron* (Beltramini, 2003), a *paradox* (Pratt & James,

1994) and metaphors as *the moral degradation of postmodern life* (Hackley, 1999). For others, however, advertising might be exactly the field of study and practice where ethics could or should flourish -anew-.

First of all, it is omnipresent and highly visible (Beltramini, 2003; Nwachukwu et al., 1997) and therefore utterly impressionable to public and political scrutiny. Secondly, it responds to people's emotions and wishes, which influences the moral rational and behavioral development in society (Gustafson, 2001). Thirdly, it functions as an important semiotic tool in identity construction and social interaction. Thus, advertising does not simply impose its messages upon the consumers, it *'is the matrix or context within which we understand ourselves and the world'* (Gustafson, 2001: 205); brands, branded products and advertising quotes act as building blocks for personal identities, *self-branding,* and interpersonal communication (Quart, 2004). According to Waide (1987), though, advertising should be contemplated negatively since it overly focuses on the acquisition of immaterial statuses like happiness through material goods. It derives people from developing immaterial ways, social skills, to achieve those same goals. Either way, advertising composes an important area to consider on the account of its centrality to people's (a)social lives. Fourthly, internationalization and globalization tendencies within the advertising industry have brought along questions of responsibility and accountability concerning unethical behavior that are complex to answer (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009). Lastly, the internet has opened up a whole new range of opportunities that challenge traditional concepts, characteristics and features of advertising and the ethical dimensions thereof. For one, the speed in which this diversification proceeds is challenging; it requires a constant renegotiation or revision of what precisely has to be seen as ethical or moral concerns (Freestone & Mitchell, 2004; Hackley, 1999). A similar assignment appears in the altered relationship between advertisers and consumers; online advertising allows for a more selective, *pulled* exposure to advertising than traditional advertising (Schlosser, Shavitt & Kanfer, 1999; Wolin & Korgaonkar, 2003). To conclude, online advertising delivers increasingly interactive, immersive configurations that make it harder to detect that advertising is at stake in general (Martin & Smith, 2008; Nairn & Drew, 2007) and what precisely constitutes informational content on the one hand and entertainment on the other.

All these aspects have turned advertising ethics into an inviting as well as pressing, daunting task to be dealt with for regulators, policy makers, advertising professionals and academics alike.

The argumentation in this paper draws particular attention to the last group and criticizes academic efforts concerning advertising and ethics for often omitting to take on proper ethical stances themselves. In first instance a quick view will be given on how advertising and ethics is generally dealt with in the industry and in research. Part of the claim is that although extended attention is given to those regarded as vulnerable in the advertising context, children, this rarely incorporates their moral evaluation of advertising practices and them being targeted as consumers. This might be due to discrepancies in expectations and portrayals of moral capacities on the one hand and the dominance of quantitative research on the other. Furthermore, arguments are listed to include the socio-economic status (SES) of respondents and to focus on children coming from low SES backgrounds since they occupy the most disadvantaged positions in a money-driven, consumerist society.

2. Advertising and ethics in a nutshell

Leaving the juridical and regulatory fields aside, the line of reasoning in this paper focuses on advertising and ethics relating to two main stakeholders in the advertising process: the advertising industry and the consumers. The former to a certain degree spontaneously seems to agree that advertising to young children (Grimm, 2004; Krueger, 1998; Nwachukwu et al., 1997; Preston, 2005), and notably the advertising of harmful products such as alcohol and cigarettes present cases of unethical advertising (Hunt & Chunko, 1987; Nwachukwu et al., 1997). Often however, (future) professionals hide behind the idea of children as *savvy consumers* (Drumwright & Murphy, 2004; Fullerton, Kendrick & Melton Mckinnon, 2013) who cannot easily be targeted and who push the industry to create more innovative, immersive and intrusive commercial messages. Or the responsibility is shaken off and passed on to regulatory and/or legislative institutions (Drumwright & Murphy, 2004; Krueger, 1998) and the social circles of family and friends (Drumwright & Murphy, 2004). Playing along government rules or industry based ethical codes of conduct appears to be in function of safeguarding a good image of professionalism (Keith, Pettijohn & Burnett, 2008; Krueger, 1998; Pratt & James, 1994) and standing up against high profile international critical consumer organizations (Carrigan & Attala, 2001) in order to prevent governments from intervening (Grimm, 2004). Or ethical conduct is pursued in the relationships with customers, clients (Drumwright & Murphy, 2004; Hunt & Chonko, 1997) as to not damage business deals and endanger the existence of the company in times of increased competitiveness and struggle for survival. Consequentially, ethical advertising behavior might be more a matter of self-protectionism than serving the social good(s).

Advertising ethics in relation to the latter group of stakeholders, the consumers, is questioned on a number of levels. The first one scrutinizes the nature of the advertised products. Similarly to the professionals' view just mentioned, ethical objections emerge in context of *sin products* (Treise et al., 1994). Though not always portrayed as an ethical concern as such, motivations for research might equally arise from moral panics or actual health problems, the advertising of alcohol (Austin, Chen & Grube, 2006), cigarettes (Bansal, John & Ling, 2005; Barbeau et al., 2005; Durkin, Biener & Wayfield, 2009; Niederdeppe et al., 2011) and drugs, fa(s)t food (Henderson & Kelly, 2005; Settle, Cameron & Thornton, 2014) and political (Kaid, 1991) advertising cause fundamental concern in academic, political and public debate. In the case of minors, the increasing number of obese children (Carter et al., 2011; Folta et al., 2006; Livingstone & Helsper, 2006; Roberts & Pettigrew, 2007; Weber, Story & Harnck, 2006) as well as the food category's dominance in children's advertising (Byrd-Bredbenner, 2002) account for numerous studies on -unhealthy- food advertising.

The second level of critical remarks is related to the advertised content. The use of *fear* (Hastings, Stead and Webb, 2004; Henthorne, Latour & Nataraajan, 1993) and/or *sex appeals* (Gould, 1994; Latour & Henthorne, 1994; Maciejewski, 2004 & 2005), for example, forms a motive for examination. Put differently, scholars are interested in how moral it is to use frightening messages and images when advertising on topics such as disease prevention and health improvement is at stake. Or to what extent it is justifiable to hint at sex(ual) activities to promote products. Is it really merely about the end justifying the means and drawing the line at particular products, judged so by

several advertisers (Maciejewski, 2005)? Gender stereotyping constitutes another topic of concern (Browne, 1998; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2002; Robinson, Gustafson & Popovich, 2008; Johnson & Young, 2002; Smith, 1994). Advertising, as any other media text, is criticized for portraying women and men or girls and boys in stereotypical role patterns or advertising gender differentiated products with corresponding stereotyped associations. A third level refers to the advertising techniques that are used. *Stealth marketing* is considered an unethical, exploitative advertising practice. It uses people's social contacts to instigate word-of-mouth promotion by acquaintances, which in the long run might result in the erosion of social interaction since nobody knows whether this interaction is commercialized or not (Martin & Smith, 2008). In addition, advertising directed at children is denounced when using *celebrity endorsement*: (Roberts & Pettigrew, 2007; Rozendaal, Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2011) and offering *premiums* (Byrd-Bredbenner, 2002; Roberts & Pettigrew, 2007; Rozendaal, Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2011) for giving away free gadgets is very appealing to children and the appearance of popular characters makes it harder for them to identify the commercial nature of the messages. A last level of ethical concern, on several occasions alluded to in this text, is linked to a particular consumer segment: children. Cognitive development-based theories state that the younger children are, the less they are capable of discerning advertising and the more susceptible they are to its influences. Research therefore aims to measure, activate and increase children's advertising literacy on a cognitive, affective and conative level.

3. The dominance of quantitative advertising research

Remarkably, the ethics of advertising in general and targeting children in particular is little elaborated upon. Singh & Vij (2007) in their questioning of adult respondents tackle the latter issue through means of the following statements: 'Most advertising distorts the values of our youth', 'Advertising stifles the creativity in children', 'Targeting children through advertising is highly objectionable', 'Most parents are not concerned about the advertising directed at their children' and some more. The response categories, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree', leave no opportunity for further clarification so no information is gathered on whether interpretations of these statements were made with particular products, techniques, media or content in mind. The fact that 52,2% (strongly) agreed upon the objectionability of children's advertising leaves almost half of the respondents to have less critical views on it, which calls for detailed argumentation. A later study based on the same statements revealed a similar result with exactly 50% of the respondents (strongly) agreeing (Devi, Kanchana & Sebastina, 2010). Sometimes the opposite is the case; studies respond to certain advertising contents, styles and products when targeting consumers in general (Gupta & Gould, 1997) and children in particular (Stanaland, Lwin & Miyazaki, 2011), yet they do not question children as being targeted *per se*. Or the aspect of consumer segments, in this line of reasoning the children, is not taken into account (Schlosser, Shavitt & Kanfer, 1999).

A problem arising in the case of moral evaluations (of any topic) is that *"it is, perhaps, the reasoning behind the judgments that is more important to understand than merely the judgments themselves"* (Maciejewski, 2005: 115). The quote of Maciejewski (2005) propounded for the integration of open-ended questions in surveys, yet it is estimated that this might not suffice and so a full on qualitative

approach is advisable when dealing with (advertising) ethics. Ritson and Elliot (1999), for example, present an ethnographic work on 16- and 17-year olds use of advertising contents. Bartholomew and O'Donohoe (2003) aim to answer the same question by having individual interviews, small friendship group discussions and making photo diaries with 10- to 12-year olds. Though their works do not consider the ethics of advertising specifically, they provide arguments and techniques to look for answers in a different, more profound way than through quantitative approaches.

Studies on advertising literacy, originating from emancipatory and empowering motives as to increase children's advertising defense mechanisms, are up to a major challenge. The longstanding legacy of Piaget's cognitive developmental thinking is registered in a focus on the cognitive stages in which children can detect and process advertising. That is to say, the dominant level within advertising literacy consists of a cognitive dimension. Relevant information is delivered on the age children are able to detect, recognize and recall advertising firstly. In a more progressed stage they become able to understand the selling intent of advertising and lastly, the most difficult stage to be reached, an understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising is acquired (Grohs, Wagner & Steiner, 2012; Rozendaal et al., 2013). The latter stage could be linked to the argumentation of Rozendaal, Lapierre, Van Reijmersdal and Buijzen (2011) to incorporate an affective dimension into advertising literacy. Since advertising tries to influence the ways consumers feel and think about brands and products, it is important to reflect on what advertising/brand/product attitudes children have.

What is lacking up until now, however, is an incorporation of a moral dimension of advertising. The aspect of advertising to children in the best case is present -without further notice- in studies on advertising professionals' and adult consumers' attitudes on or evaluation of advertising, yet it is lost when children define the research respondents. Though the concept of *skepticism*, seen as an component of the cognitive processing dimension of advertising literacy, might suggest a critical stance to advertising in general, it merely relates to the advertising content as in the truthfulness of the advertising messages (see Obermiller & Spangenberg, 2000; Rozendaal et al., 2011).

Whether this is due to the quantitative research approaches making it difficult to gather profound information on moral judgments and evaluations or an underestimation of children's moral reasoning and handling capacities is not clear. The latter, for all clarity, is a misconception. Since little, children have the ability to think and act as moral agents on a daily basis, they *"confront issues of justice, equal distribution and sharing. They respond to others' actions and feelings, and meet approval or disapproval of their own actions"* (Mayall, 2002: 88). Yet there is a discrepancy between the expectations and performances of their morality. Parents expect them to show the aforementioned consideration of others but rarely value its occurrence. Children in their turn, have low self-confidence or consciousness when asked about moral actions, even though their stories prove otherwise (Mayall, 2002). Obtaining insights in children's moral evaluation of advertising, then, requires taking time to dig deep into their proper opinions and experiences. The *Sociology of Childhood* has made it its objective to pay full respects to the opinions and experiences of children. For they do not only constitute a permanent structural category in and constructed by society, they are also active social agents creating their

own cultures on the one hand and contributing to the production and *interpretive reproduction* of the adult worlds on the other (Corsaro, 2005).

Letting children speak for themselves moreover decreases the perils of analyzing things from an -exclusively- adult point of view, which carries with it a possibility/probability of different cognitive frameworks to construe reality (Bauman, 2008) and differing moral standards. Advertising students' lower objections -in comparison to advertising professionals- to unethical advertising practices (Keith, Pettijohn & Burnett, 2008) might be related to them belonging to a different generation more than it being a matter of less professional experience. Beard (2003), for example, found that college students from a later generation differed most in advertising attitudes when ethical aspects where concerned. Whether this is a case of increased skepticism and cynicism and lowered expectations of the ethicality of advertising, as the author suggests, or of changed moral attitudes and behaviors in general is up to scrutiny.

4. Arguments for incorporating the SES of children

Besides the suggestion that advertising literacy research should incorporate a moral dimension and consider qualitative approaches, one final correction is to be made. In the context of consumerist societies it seems logical to take into account the socio-economic backgrounds they come from. From this stance, the most vulnerable children are those belonging to families having trouble to make ends meet. Moreover, the *social embeddedness* of moral reasoning (Meadows, 2010) strengthens this requirement. Research on advertising ethics should start at those experiencing the effects of a low socio-economic status whose participation is most problematic. Though several scholars favor the integration of the social context in which children are exposed to and use advertising messages (O'Donohoe & Tynan, 1998; Ritson & Elliot, 1999), occasionally referring to the SES specifically, as in *"variations across socioeconomic and cultural dimensions that have not been adequately explored"* (Eagle, 2007), this scarcely results in *peer influence* and peer cultures being studied (Rozendaal et al., 2013) without acknowledging the role of the SES explicitly. Preference is given to the factor age and -occasionally- gender (see An, Jin & Park, 2014; Austin, Chen & Grube, 2006; Derbaix & Pecheux, 2003; Grohs, Wagner & Steiner, 2012; Oates, Blades & Gunter, 2002; Rozendaal, Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2011; Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal & Buijzen, 2012). Or the SES is incorporated in the light of obtaining a representative sample (see Bakir & Vitell, 2010; Rozendaal, Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2009; Rozendaal, Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2011) subsequently omitting to contemplate it as a full-fledged unit of analysis.

Further arguments for the incorporation of the SES are tied to the advertising context and spring from varying fields of work. Studies on advertising effects, advertising content analysis, advertising attitudes and digital divides, even when not aimed at minors directly but providing adult population-based data, should at least raise awareness for the SES to be taken into consideration.

First of all, both the possession and use of new media in low SES families requires notification. The first-level digital divide indicates that they have less access to computers and the internet, make less often use of it (Adriaens, Van Damme &

Courtois, 2011; Eurobarometer 78, 2012; Flash Eurobarometer, 2008; Livingstone & Helsper, 2010; Mertens & d'Haenens, 2010; Moreas & Pickery, 2011; Notten et al., 2009; Rideout, Foehr & Roberts, 2010; Tsatsou, Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Murru, 2009) and have higher chances of the technology and connection being of lower quality in comparison to other SES-level families (Hsieh, Rai & Keil, 2008; Schofield Clark, Demont-Heinrich & Webber, 2005; Rideout, Foehr & Roberts, 2010). The second-level digital divide implies that low SES adolescent and adult internet users do not take full advantage of the capacities of the virtual world. The *breadth* of their online activities is limited, even for 9- till 19-year olds (Livingstone & Helsper, 2006), which means their online activities portray less variety and are considered to be less emancipatory in nature (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Hsie, Rai & Keil, 2008; Notten et al., 2009; Tsatsou, Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Murru, 2009). Their internet skills (Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2012; Schofied Clark, Demont-Heinrich & Webber, 2005) as well as their trust in the medium itself (Eurobarometer 78, 2012) are of lower level than their high(er) SES counterparts'.

The possible consequences for the younger teenagers and children cannot be underestimated. Low SES children cannot profit to the same extent from the benefits parental internet behavior can have (Tsatsou, Pruulman-Vengerfeldt & Murru, 2009). Low internet skills hinder parents to fulfill an educative role in enhancing their children's learning process on how to work with, create and evaluate ICT's features and content (Livingstone & Das, 2010). The children are aware of this fact and ask less for their help than peers with higher SES backgrounds (Flash Eurobarometer, 2008). Another impediment for learning opportunities lies in the fact that the monitoring practices of low SES parents more often result in restrictive mediation (Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2012), which denies their children the opportunities to improve their ICT knowledge and skills at a preliminary level. These facts have important implications in relation to advertising ethics and literacy. Firstly, the differing media possession and use patterns influence the kind and amount of advertising minors encounter. (See for example Schlosser, Shavitt & Kanfer, 1999, for percentages of online advertising exposure relating to respondents' different SES). Secondly, the new, hybrid dimensions and characteristics of advertising, especially in the context of new media and differing levels of digital literacy, have an impact on the levels and ways in which advertising can be detected and processed as such. Scholars questioning children on their moral evaluation of advertising -targeting them- should keep in mind the role media possession and use can play in the amount and nature of advertising they are exposed to.

Secondly, findings on advertising content require attention. Smoking advertising targeting low Indian SES-communities, for example, contained more abstract ideals and homeland culture variations of aspiration than was the case in high SES-communities (Bansal, John & Ling, 2005). The paragraph on advertising effects, composing the fourth line of reasoning, supports this SES-inspired diversification of advertising styles and characteristics. Again, the nature of advertising might differ along the lines of the SES one has.

Thirdly, further elaborating on the content-related argument, not only the semantics and images use in advertising, *how* the products are advertised, are of importance. The advertised products per se, *what* is advertised, deserve equal attention. Research has shown that the SES of communities impacts the kinds of products that are

advertised. Low SES-areas demonstrate a higher presence of advertising on sugar rich beverages and fast food chain foods whereas high SES-areas present more diet varieties of soft drinks and convenience stores (Settle, Cameron & Thornton, 2014). In the case of cigarettes and tobacco advertising is more prevalent in communities of lower SES (Barbeau et al., 2005). Accordingly, the geographical -often SES-related-location should be taken into consideration on the account of its possible link to advertising as well.

Fourthly, studies on advertising effects pronounce differences in SES-levels. Low SES-smokers' recollection and perceived effectiveness of various smoking cessation campaigns is more related to the message of the advertising than it is for high(er) SES smokers. In particular, a personal, emotionally evocative and testimonial style of advertising is most appealing to and effective for them (Durkin, Biener & Wakefield, 2009; Niederdeppe et al., 2011). In the case of health related information direct-to-consumer advertising has proven to be most efficient for low SES people's health care and behavior (Murray et al., 2004). These kinds of studies underline the SES-related diversification in terms of content appeal. Advertising literacy's effectiveness, for example, can be influenced by the particular style and content of a commercial message according to different SES-characteristics.

Lastly, studies on children's advertising attitudes have to work on the possible role of the SES. The research of D'Alessio, Laghi and Baiocco (2009) is indicatory in this context. Even though it does not show a SES-influence of the credence in advertisements, it establishes a higher advertising enjoyment in low SES children and a higher behavioral intention in high SES children. Bartholomew and O'Donohoe (2003) in their turn found that low SES children are less reality questioners than high(er) SES children, which they suggest might be caused by lower self-expression abilities of the former rather than a fundamental difference in advertising attitude. Anyhow, these writings confirm the worthiness of integrating the SES into all levels of analysis and reporting to deepen the academic knowledge and consequentially inspire and direct the pedagogical, societal and political actions that might and could be taken to raise advertising literacy amongst all minors.

One element taken from everyday life is added to the list of argumentation. In November 2014, internet search engine Google launched its *Contributor* [xv] experiment. It aims to reduce the advertising internet users are exposed to in exchange for a monthly contribution ranging from one to three dollars. The contribution goes specifically to the websites -participating in the experiment- the users visit. The websites sponsored portray a small 'thank you'-message in the areas normally filled with advertisements. Although it is not yet clear what amount of money Google could make with this new service[xvi] -it might be more than through website advertising-, two other ethical problem arise. Firstly, people having to pay for it turns the liberation of advertising into a luxury item not all are willing or, more importantly, able to pay for. Low SES families, already vulnerable within the digital context, this way might be disadvantaged to an even larger extent. Secondly, in case users refrain from the pay-for-advertising-free-websites-option, it might provide Google with a fundamental argument to justify its advertising-based business model [xvii] and proceed with inundating users with advertising that is continuously being more difficult to detect and avoid.

5. The challenging collection of SES-related data

The soliciting for and reporting on SES-related data, however, is accompanied by difficulties. On the level of the conceptualization of the SES there is no clear notion on what dimensions should be queried. Consequentially, SES-gathering is characterized by ambiguity. Using literature on media possession and use it becomes clear that three indicators avail; the household income, the educational level of the parents and their occupational status. On some occasions, all three are taken into consideration (Dobransky & Hargittai, 2006; Eurobarometer 78, 2012). Often, though two indicators are used with preference to the combinations of the educational level and occupational status (Adriaens, Van Damme & Courtois, 2011; Devroe, Driesen & Saeys, 2005; Flash Eurobarometer, 2008; Notten et al., 2009) and household income and educational level (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Hsieh, Rai & Keil, 2008; Moreas & Pickery, 2011; Paulussen et al., 2011; Pickery & Moreas, 2011). In the case of advertising literacy-related research this last combination seems to be preferred (D'Alessio, Laghi & Baiocco, 2009; Durkin, Biener & Wakefield, 2009; Murray et al., 2004; Niederdeppe et al., 2011). Whereas the educational level (Hargittai, 2008; Martens & Meers, 2011; Paus-Hasebrink et al., 2012) and occupational status (Van Coillie & Raedts, 2014) emerge as single indicators, this is rarely the case for household income. The numerous *missing values* in this matter (Durkin, Biener & Wakefield, 2009; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Mertens & d'Haenens, 2010; Pickery & Moreas, 2011; Van De Walle, Bradt & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013), and explicitly in respondents with little resources (Meyer & Sullivan, 2012) probably account for that.

On the level of the operationalization of the above indicators a similar diversity comes into sight. As concerns the educational level, the question varies from asking for the number of years of study (Eurobarometer 78, 2012; Flash Eurobarometer, 2008; Moreas & Pickery, 2011) to the highest achieved degree (Adriaens, Van Damme & Courtois, 2011; D'Alessio, Laghi & Baiocco, 2009; Devroe et al., 2005; Dobransky & Hargittai, 2006; Hargittai, 2008; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Hsieh, Rai & Keil, 2008; Paulussen et al. 2011) with the number of answering categories varying from two (Durkin, Biener & Wakefield, 2009) to twelve (Adriaens, Van Damme & Courtois, 2011). As concerns the occupational status occasionally the binary question arises whether one has a paid job or not (Devroe et al., 2005; Pickery & Moreas, 2011; Van Coillie & Raedts, 2014), or whether one works fulltime/part-time or not at all (Dobransky & Hargittai, 2006). On other instances a more scale-like approach is at work offering categories of professions (Adriaens, Van Damme & Courtois, 2011; Eurobarometer 78; Flash Eurobarometer, 2008), yet again with differing numbers of categories. In order to know more about the household income the respondents can be asked to declare a specific amount of money they earn or watch coming in (Dobransky & Hargittai, 2006). Another method is to designate one number as distinctive income and consequentially to report on those having less or more than the amount put forward (Durkin, Biener & Wakefield, 2009; Moreas & Pickery, 2011). Finally, scales with increasing levels of income can be used (D'Alessio, Laghi & Baiocco, 2009; Hsieh, Rai & Keil, 2008). Important in either case is to be transparent on the temporal dimension of the question, as in referring to income gained on a monthly (D'Alessio et al., 2009; Moreas & Pickery, 2011) or yearly (Durkin, Biener & Wakefield, 2009; Hsieh, Rai & Keil, 2008) basis.

Following the work of Alwitt and Donley (1996) the household income indicator can be categorized into all three of their poverty tresholds, depending on the actual operationalization. Most of all, it constitutes an objective absolute poverty treshold in delineating the minimum that is necessary to lead a basic lifestyle. That is to say, on the basis of empirical data, for example through the principle of a food basket, it can be determined what is the minimum income to have a decent life. Secondly, it can constitute an objective relative poverty threshold, a notion of relative economic deprivation, whenever families are considered to not meet *"contemporary standards of living within a society",* in reference to the progression of commodities required for societal participation (Alwitt & Donley, 1996: 28). The household incomes of families in this instance are portrayed as a percentage of the median income level. Thirdly, the subjective poverty threshold can be of help. The feeling of economic deprivation sounds highly relevant in the case of the advertising context. For it sheds light on the feelings and opinions of consumers on what they have and do not have, moving beyond the basic nutritional, hygienic and health needs. Unlike with both other poverty tresholds, the researchers are not the ones determining -arbitrarily- what is necessary for a decent life. Examples heading towards this kind of approach can be found in questions like 'when do you experience difficulties in paying the bills' - possible answers being 'most of the time, occasionally or never'- (Eurobarometer 78, 2008) or 'how do you make ends meet' -this being 'difficult, manageable or comfortably'- (Pickery & Moreas, 2011).

In case SES-related information is to be obtained through proxy reports of kid-respondents, researchers should apprehend that it is probably even harder to collect (Schor, 2004) and possibly has to be approached through indirect questions (Van Coillie & Raedts, 2014). Age seems to be an important factor here, although conclusions are not unison; they range from the age of thirteen when children deliver SES reports that align with the parent's responses (Lien, Friestad & Klepp, 2001) to the age of high school seniors presenting accurate data (Looker, 1989).

6. Conclusion

This paper argued that within the context of advertising and ethics, scholars could take things further. Ethical concern principally goes out to children since they are considered most vulnerable to advertising influences. Advertising literacy research committed to the empowerment of children as to critically process advertising has some major challenges to face, though. For one, it does not probe children's ethical evaluation of advertising in general and them being targeted in particular. Leaving the latter aspect to the confinements of adults' perceptions and opinions does not map children's proper standpoints and might fail to explore possible generational changes and developments in moral attitudes and expectations towards social interaction. To incorporate a moral dimension in advertising literacy, it seems advisable to complement quantitative research methods and techniques with qualitative ones in order to acquire thick, contextualized data. Furthermore, despite the difficulties in obtaining such information, research should take into account the socio-economic backgrounds the children have. Research has shown that advertising attitudes and advertised content and products can differ along the lines of the SES. And most importantly, their SES defines the social contexts and participation opportunities in consumerist societies. This being said, although low SES-children are considered

most vulnerable in latter sense, the same complex financial –and numerous related other- situation might imply that they are more communicated about and thus aware of the hardships in and limitations to consumption. Consequentially, elaborating on the moral evaluation of advertising might result in low-SES children portraying more elaborated notions of advertising literacy in comparison to their high(er) SES-peers.

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