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Ethical Considerations on Advertising to Children

Iulia GRAD¹

Abstract

This paper focuses on one of the most controversial areas of advertising, namely advertising to children. Two important issues underline the analysis we propose: on the one hand, the fact that children represent a category of consumers extremely vulnerable to advertising messages; on the other hand, children are a preferred target of advertising and marketing strategies, because they are a category of consumers with growing financial power. Our approach seeks to address from an ethical perspective the practice of advertising to children, emphasizing the necessity both of a balanced relationship between the regulation and the self-regulation of specific activities and of the development of media education and skills. At the same time, the analysis highlights the idea that in order to better approach the practice of advertising to children, we must take into account the specific conditions of postmodern society, where the impact of advertising is increasingly complex and where the advertising communication model has penetrated important social spheres.

Keywords: *advertising, children, brands, advertising in schools, consumer society.*

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Introduction

One of the most controversial practice in advertising industry is the advertising addressed to children. The diversity of the opinions of those who approach this issue is mirrored by the differences among the states in terms of the regulation of this of practice. The controversies which characterize the debate about the role and the impact of advertising communication, both on the individual and on society on the whole, become even more heated when the public is represented by children.

Whether the advertising is depicted as an instrument of consumer society which offers information about the products or as an important part of a symbolic system which carries the instruments used for the construction of reality and of individual identities, acting as “a kind of concentrated story with the capacity to turn into a significant story” (Frunză, 2014, 7) becomes the stake of the debate around advertising to children.

The paper aims to identify and analyse the main ethical challenges raised by the advertising addressed to children. In the first part, I focus on the recent evolution of the field of advertising to children and on the factors that have concurred to this development. The next subsections center on particular aspects specific for advertising to children which are especially challenging from an ethical perspective, such as the negative impact of advertising message on certain age groups or the presence of advertising in schools. Beyond this specific issues approached, the article highlights the role of advertising as a generator of symbolic meanings in postmodern society.

The consumer-child

Children represent an important part of the large category known as the “vulnerable audiences,” together with other consumers that are considered vulnerable to marketing and advertising strategies. Yet, children are more exposed to advertising messages, firstly because of their psychological immaturity. Additionally, the recent evolution in the sphere of parenting, which credit the child with more independence and a more powerful voice in the family discussions about the acquisitions and finances, contribute to the development of the market of products for children and, thus, to the outlining of the category of the consumer-child, children becoming thus an important target for the marketing and advertising industry.

Within the context of the growing purchase power that children hold directly – their own money coming from allowances, presents or earned

money – and indirectly – money payed by the parents for products marketed for children- children become an important element in the marketing equation. The term “kid-fluence” indicates precisely the growing influence of children on the parents in the process of purchasing goods. This trend is the result of the paradigm change in parenting, which gives the child more power and independence within the family. (Schor, 2004, p. 23)

Also, the fact that the time spent by parents with their children is growing short in comparison with the time spent at work has as result the purchase of children's products in order to compensate for this lack. It is the so-called factor “quilt money” which turns eventually into an increase in the purchasing power of children. This does not mean necessary that the parents’ feeling of quilt for not spending enough time with the children is the engine of the purchase, but “marketers’ belief in the power of guilt, and their ability to exploit it, remains strong.” (Schor, 2004, p. 25)

The interest of the advertising industry towards children is explained also by the fact that it aims to encourage early consumer loyalty to brands. Thus, “kids and teens are now the epicenter of American consumer culture. They command the attention, creativity and dollars of advertisers. Their tastes drive market trends. Their opinion shape brand strategies. Yet, few adults recognize the magnitude of this shift and its consequences for the future of our children and of our culture.” (Schor, 2004, 9)

Juliet Schor proposes a very interesting correlation between developmental psychology and marketing. The objective of the analysis proposed by Schor is to demonstrate that nowadays marketing proposes a reconceptualization of the process of child development as a learning process of purchasing goods. Thus, a process of naturalization of consumer desires of the child takes place. “In contemporary marketing, the naturalization of consumer desires has been codified into so set of timeless emotional needs all children are believed to possess.” These needs are identified in the sphere of advertising: the need for gender differentiation, the need for sensory stimulation, the need for affection, the need to confront fears. (Schor, 2004, p. 44)

Despite the recent burst, advertising to children remains a highly controversial practice, a source of continuing debates and disputes. Perhaps more than in other areas of advertising and marketing, in the case of advertising to children the debate take place especially in the field of ethics.

The supporters of advertising to children base their argument on three main pillars: the respect of the right to free expression, which includes advertising, the informative role of advertising as a source of information

about products and the economic role of advertising as a force essential for the development of the consumer economy.

On the other hand, the critics of this practice denounce that advertising contributes to the development of unhealthy habits in children, especially in terms of food habits. Advertising also contributes to the perpetuating of gender and social stereotypes, as well as of a shallow materialistic vision of life. Moreover, the advertising texts inflame the disputes between parents and children regarding the goods purchased by the family.

Summarizing the main arguments brought in the debate about advertising to children, we can identify three main positions. The first position argues that advertising to children should be banned because it has harmful effects on them, it encourages undesirable habits, it determines harmful behaviours among children who are inexperienced consumers and easily fall into the trap of the increasingly sophisticated marketing strategies. Another position, a more moderate, yet critical one, states that advertising to children is an acceptable practice, when it is submitted to special regulations. A third position considers that advertising is a fundamental part of contemporary culture and society that cannot be avoided, and that children must learn to manage the relationship with advertisements as part of the process of socialization of the consumer. This last position considers that self-regulation is the most appropriate method to establish the frameworks in which the practice of advertising to children should be carried out. (Toland Frith & Mueller, 2003, p. 161)

Accordingly, the advertising addressed to children is justified by the fact that it gives to the children a sense of power, contributing to their development into independent individuals. Beyond the already mentioned arguments that defend the practice of advertising to children, the advertising industry rejects the accusation of contributing to the spread of harmful behaviors among children and of negatively affecting the relationship with others and with themselves, saying that parents are those responsible for children's education and that they have to prevent the excesses.

Although children were regarded as consumers before the establishment of consumer society, within the 20th century (Amidon Lusted, 2009, p. 19), they have become avid consumers of popular culture during the last decades, their immersion in the culture of consumption reaching its peak in present times. During this process of transformation of children into

autonomous consumers, or the “commercialization of childhood,” (Schor, 2004, p. 13) advertising and marketing have played an important part.

Children, brands and advertising for *cool*

This subsection of the article aims at underlining the importance the symbolic dimension of advertising, understood not only in terms of the characteristics of the advertised product, but in terms of the way in which their purchase allows us to express ourselves, within the context of what Serra Tinic describes as „the increasingly commodified nature of self and group representation in the latest stage of advanced capitalism.” (Tinic, 1992, p. 14)

In this framework, we focus on some of the main instruments used by advertisers in order to better address to children. Thus, we can identify some recurrent themes used by the advertising and marketing industry which represent indispensable instruments for a successful campaign. An essential element is the brand transformed into “signs, pure symbolical entities, detached from the specific products and functional characteristics.” (Schor, 2004, p. 26) The fact that nowadays advertising does not sell simple goods, but products to which the brand has impregnated a whole other nature, enriches the process of acquisition with “a new dimension, which cannot be described anything other than spiritual.” (Klein, 2006, p. 40)

As Andrew Wernick states, the industrial capitalism brings, not only a greater number of products, but a new type of product, characterized by the indissoluble connection with a new type of cultural expression in which are involved the mediated advertising and the sign – the commodity. The raise of this new type of product has generated a major change of the social structure, more precisely, “a mutation in the relation between economic ‘base’ and cultural ‘superstructure’ such that the latter has become absorbed into the former – as the zone of circulation and exchange – while the former – as the zone of production – has itself become a major cultural apparatus.” (Wernick, 1992, p. 19)

The liberal perspective assesses the role and impact of brands in contemporary society from an optimistic point of view. Thus, in a society where rational choices are difficult to make due to the variety of products, brands represent clarity, insurance, consistency, status, and belonging – everything which helps the individual to define himself. (Kornberger, 2010, p. 207). What brands have to offer are in fact “ready-made identities, because they have infiltrated the social world in such a profound way that they have become an important element in its shaping. Once the

autonomous position of the buyer is confirmed, choosing and purchasing a brand becomes a vote in its favour, and can be interpreted as a political act, of sanction or approval of the respective company's policy". (Kornberger, 2010, p. xii) Beyond the fact that brands seem to be the catalyst for modern capitalism, in the context of an increasingly globalized market, brands become pathways between cultures and nations.

On the other hand, the critics of consumer culture draw attention to the fact that the contemporary individual is caught in the trap of needs created by the society of consumption, needs largely defined by the brand and the logo attached which in fact "do not add value – they are value, the market value, and thus value as such." (Bauman, 2009, p. 209) Noteworthy is also the vocabulary used by those who draw attention to the danger of a brand *invasion*, which *infests* culture through different channels, *taking over* spaces which should be protected from the *expansion* of branding. (Klein, 2006, pp. 50-53)

Even if the members of the consumer society are united by their essential consumer trait, consumption has become the main criteria for social exclusion, and the brand represents the instrument of acceptance or stigmatization. The contribution of consumer culture to the construction of identity is being sanctioned for functioning as a process of identity commercialization. In this process, the traditional institutions – church, family, community – have been replaced by substitutes whose profound drive is a financial one. While it appears that the individual enjoys more freedom in building his identity, this freedom actually represents a "formal freedom", the possibility of choosing between several preset options, shaped by someone else, and which "turns your decisions into pseudo-decisions and sells you what you need to retain the style that is supposedly yours. Lifestyle shapes life itself. And lifestyle is shaped by brands. The freedom to express ourselves is tightly linked to the production machinery of capitalism. In this context, freedom is an illusion: you can choose between different lifestyles, but you are not free to be not governed through lifestyle." (Kornberger, 2010, p. 170) As regards the connection created by consumption and by brands, this is described rather as an uniformization and conformism, resulting in a decreasing interest towards local products and traditions. (Gunter, et al., 2005, p. 4)

However, beyond the fact that brand is perceived by both sides as either part of the solution, or as part of the problem, we must admit that it is, as Martin Kornberger states, a "fait accompli", omnipresent in

contemporary society. The brand has recently experienced an expansion, especially in the case of products for children, in the sense that brands belong to a network of other products, which is continuously expanding, products of a totally different nature than the ones the brand was initially connected to. Thus, clothes, food, toys, school supplies, books, all can become medium for the brand. The more profound effect of these trends affects the very structure and experience of a child's play. The context in which children play is now structured around considerations related to marketing, and "play in fact has become highly ritualized - less an exploration and solidification of personal experience and the developing conceptual schema than a rearticulating of the fantasy world provided by market designers." (Jhally in Askew Wilks, 2002, p. 332)

Responsible for this is also the monopoly from the industry of products and programs designed for children, through the standardization of products, trends, and preferences. Furthermore, the centralization of power and finance in the hands of a small number of giant companies is equivalent to less power and influence of consumers, which leads to the increase of political influence of the same parties, and to the hardening of the legal process meant to protect the consumer. (Schor, 2004, pp. 28-29)

Closely related to the concept of brand, we find the concept of *cool*. Nowadays, cool represents a universal value in whose definition marketing and advertising play an essential part. Children's social world is increasingly built around consumption and the cool items promoted by advertisements. To mention a few features that characterize the "coolness", we notice that it is an exclusivist state from a social point of view – designating rather expensive products. Also, the trend of "cool" is established by some people, who represent the embodiment of coolness, the so called trendsetters. Often times, cool implies a violation of taboo, of rules, as well as danger. Especially in the case of children, the cool products are promoted using age compression, meaning the use of products and marketing messages initially created for older kids, and targeting them for younger children. (Gunther and all., 2005, p. 11) For example, promoting brand clothes among preschoolers. This practice has negative implications which are sanctioned by those that criticize advertising addressed to children. Thus, because it encourages an inappropriate behavior, age compression used in marketing and advertising strategies implies the hyper - sexualisation of children, it may generate confusion and affect self-esteem. (Schor, 2004, p. 55). Even more so, the segmentation of an audience composed of children, causes separation

by gender and age among them and discourages group interaction through games. (Jhally in Askew Wilks, 2002, p. 332)

Often, *cool* is defined by marketing strategies used for children as being opposed to the adult world. The adults, represented as parents or teachers, are portrayed as being uncool, in contrast to the kids. Although the practice of co-opting the young rebel through such messages is nothing new, marketing contributes to the more frequent presence of a “strong and sophisticated anti-adulthood” in advertising.” (Schor, 2004, p. 51)

The exploitation and stimulation of marketing strategies whose purpose is to separate the world of children and adults is problematic from an ethical perspective. The fundament on which the world of children was created by advertising is that “kids rule”, and the main argument which justifies this practice is that of the independence and autonomy of the child, by increasing the power that he has at his disposal and thus increasing his self-esteem and self-confidence. (Schor, 2004, pp. 51-53) These arguments, however, are not unassailable, since the purchase of goods cannot constitute the basis for a healthy image of oneself, and often the products are not up to the expectations of the children, who are disappointed by the choices they made, thus questioning their own ability to make decisions.

Furthermore, and this is one of the strongest arguments against this type of advertising strategies addressed to children, by encouraging the separation between children and adults, whether parents or teachers, advertisements undermine a vital relationship for the development of children. Presenting the relation with adults as being useless and even irritating, advertisements shape the image of a world in which the relations with the material world are significant, representing a source of joy, safety and comfort.

Also, with the help of the “nag factor” which is encouraged and exploited by the ubiquity of advertising through messages which impose “Collect them all!”, advertising is suspected of negatively influencing the relation between children and their parents. But Toland Frith, after analyzing several studies conducted on this theme, concludes that while advertisements determine children to repeatedly ask their parents to buy more things, these requests do not lead to frequent or dysfunctional conflicts. Even more, there are voices saying that “pester power” actually indicates the increasingly significance that the child’s opinion gains in the family’s process of negotiation regarding the list of future purchases. (Toland Frith & Mueller, 2003, p. 140) More than ever, the children’s voices

are heard, and they have at their disposal instruments with which they can have a better control over the world in which they live. (Amidon Lusted, 2009, 55) Thus, the advertisers “profess belief in the autonomy and power of youth. Indeed, they hardly ever use the terms *children* and *childhood*. They believe in *kids*.” (Schor, 2004, p. 203)

The argument of the advertising industry is built around the idea that children today have become more capable of detecting the advertising messages, their intention, and not be manipulated by them. Although, children’s ability to escape advertising persuasion and marketing strategies is still a subject which raises contradictory opinions, studies which have investigated this matter were not able to reach a common conclusion. “There is no evidence that children's cognitive development is any more rapid now than it ever was. There is therefore no reason to believe that contemporary young children have greater insights into the nature of advertising than their predecessors had.” (Gunter and all, 2005, p. 11)

Studies investigating the children’s ability to understand the nature of advertisements show that they can distinct advertising from other type of program from the age of 5-6 years, while at 8 years they start to understand the purpose of advertising and acknowledge the persuasive dimension of advertisements, and start to doubt the veracity of the information they receive. Even more, from this age onward the disbelief in the advertising message starts to develop, a worrying aspect for the marketing industry. (Toland Frith & Mueller, 2003, p. 140; Schor, 2004, pp. 65-67) But there cannot be a consensus regarding the age at which children understand the persuasive nature of advertising message, there are voices who argue that kids nowadays are more precocious in escaping advertising persuasion, due precisely to a very early interaction with advertising texts. (Amidon Lusted, 2009, p. 58)

The lack of consensus regarding the time at which children become informed and competent consumers, as well as the multiplicity and fluidity of factors which can influence this capacity, have led to different legal regulations. Thus, in some countries, such as Norway and Sweden, advertising aimed at children aged under 12 is totally forbidden, while in Australia it is forbidden to broadcast commercials during programs for preschool children. In some cases, there are regulations which prohibit the advertising of certain products. For example, in Greece it is forbidden to advertise toys. (Gunter, Oates, 2005, 140)

Representative for the sphere of advertising is the coexistence of both legal regulations as well as self-regulations. The UN report in the field

of cultural rights draws attention on the fact that the multitude of documents which regulate the activity in the field of advertising and marketing makes it difficult to convey the message of those documents and affects the transparency of the hierarchy of those norms, the way in which different regulations and self-regulations relate to each other and the way in which they are implemented, as well as the authority which sanctions the violations. Moreover, specific regulations do not refer to the new marketing and advertising instruments, such as the use of online and neuromarketing. (UN Report, 2014, p. 7)

The UN report draws attention precisely on the new developments in the field of advertising which is increasingly characterized by the weakening of the border between commercial advertising and other types of content which is particularly related to the field of culture and education, the ubiquity of commercial advertising and marketing in public spaces, and the multiplication of the channels through which this type of messages are conveyed and can affect rational decision making. Furthermore, the rise of the internet permits a “tighter integration of advertising and consumer socialization (...) such clandestine forms of marketing place children at a distinct disadvantage.” (Blades and all, 2014, p. 5) The document highlights the need to create mechanisms capable of protecting the public against advertising messages, and a stricter regulation of these advertising messages, especially in the case of those affecting children. (UN Report, 2014, p. 2)

The report devotes a significant part to advertising addressed to children. Based on the Convention on Children Rights (UN General Assembly, 1990) the author of the report refers to the growing commercialization of the environment in which children develop in contemporary society. What becomes obvious is the need for a strict regulation regarding advertising messages and materials addressed to children in order to protect them, especially since the ability of children aged less than 12 to detect advertising messages and to properly understand them is disputed, more than that, since the new advertising strategies increasingly manage to bypass the cognitive mechanisms of defense. (UN Report, 2014, p. 14)

School as an advertising space

One of the most heated debates regarding advertising for children is its presence in public schools. Advertising in schools is a practice which can be identified even in the countries in which advertising is prohibited by law, but in these cases it is disguised as other activities, such as sponsorships or

the conveyance of educational content, such as courses organized in schools by companies.

The main argument on which the advocates of advertising in schools rely is that this practice represents a public-private partnership which benefits the schools, benefits which the school would not be able to afford by only accessing their resources. On the other hand, critics point out that advertising in schools is a dangerous phenomenon, with a harmful impact on the educational process. First of all they sanction the existence of a commercial influence in a public space destined for education, which offers marketing the promise of a “servile audience”. (Schor, 2004, p. 86) Also, the delivery of advertising messages negatively affects educational activities because it consumes the period of time reserved for such activities. Moreover, advertising messages are likely to clash with the messages submitted by the educational curricula, because it encourages excessive consumption, an unhealthy diet and emphasizes the importance of physical appearance. (Toland Frith & Mueller, 2003, p. 154)

Advertising in schools is regulated differently in each state, because school represents “a distinct cultural space which requires special protection against commercial influence.” (UN Report, 2014, p. 15). However, the UN Report mentions numerous examples of advertising messages transmitted in schools, even stating the existence of a process of “children branding” from an early age.

In Romania, a known case is that of Nadia Comaneci who had been the image of a known brand of margarine for a long time. The ads depicting Nadia Comaneci while preparing her son a “breakfast of champions” have been running since 2010, but in June 2012 this brand organized a campaign in several schools from Bucharest in which children were encouraged to consume a product which was found to be harmful for their health. This campaign has generated heated debate in the Romanian media and led to the prohibition of the advertisements by the CNA (National Audiovisual Committee), the decision being motivated by the fact that the ad does not respect the regulations of the Ethical Code for Advertising to Children Concerning Food Products. The wave of criticism targeting the campaign and Nadia Comaneci was first of all aimed at the promoted product, but interesting is that it was triggered by the fact that the event took place in a school, although it was held in partnership with the respective school and it was presented as an educational activity.

But even when there are restrictions, the school becomes a coveted space by marketing practices, and advertising messages manage to infiltrate

in schools through various forms. The UN Report mentions that private sponsoring truly help schools, but this should not turn schools into billboards. For example, information regarding sponsorships should be mentioned only outside school, with the exception of logos that could be imprinted on the objects donated to the school. (UN Report, 2014, p. 16) The most radical recommendation made by the special rapporteur aims at banning all types of advertising addressed to children aged under 12, extendable to 16 years and the prohibition of employment among children as “brand ambassador”.(UN Report, 2014, p. 23)

The strict regulation through legislative instruments to the detriment of self-regulation of the advertising industry is countered by the position that supports the importance of advertising as a source of information regarding products, the personal and private nature of consumption as well as the image of an informed consumer and an honest and competitive market. But this perspective loses sight of an essential feature of consumption in contemporary society. More than ever, in communicational society, consumption cannot be perceived as a private, individual activity. “In fact, consumption is an entirely social activity, and what a person buys, wears, drives or eats affects the desires and behaviors of others.” (Schor, 2004, p. 191) The view on consumption as a profoundly social activity weakens the argument against a regulatory intervention and rethinks the situation from a broader perspective. This framework requires a mix of actions which combine self-regulation of advertising industry, legal regulation through actions aimed at educating the public regarding the new conditions imposed by the consumer society. In this regard, Furnham believes that parents represent the most important factor in children’s understanding of advertising’s persuasive intent. “Banning advertising of any sort shelters or at least delays a child's understanding and decision making. It can be no substitute for parental guidance. The responsibility for educating children into the economic world cannot and indeed should not be removed from their parents.” (Furnham apud Gunter, Oates, Blades, 2005, p. 12) But placing responsibility solely on parents is also problematic, because, on the one hand, the parents may lack the necessary skills to understand the nature and impact of advertising on the individual, and, on the other hand, it makes the advertising industry less responsible. An important part in this complex area represented by advertising to children is the education and training of children for the consumer society. But this must be the result of the

collaboration between all the factors involved, parents, the educational system, and the advertising industry.

The multiple facets of advertising – economic instrument, generator of symbolic meanings in the society of consumption, art form – situate it in an oscillating space which allows different approaches based on very different arguments. My approach aims to emphasize the fact that the oscillating space occupied by advertising in contemporary society demands a special dynamic between ethical and legal in terms of regulating the specific activity of this field. Moreover, investigating the phenomenon of contemporary advertising using the tools of ethics is essential for a proper mapping of such a complex field which is constantly evolving.

Conclusion

While avoiding a Manichean positioning vis-à-vis advertising to children, the paper states the importance of the ethical investigation of the issue, given the necessity of finding a balance between ethical and legal in the sphere of advertising. The need for a strict regulation of certain advertising practices is obvious, as well as the need for their regular review and adjunction, according to the developments in the field. At the same time, it is necessary to provide a space where actions do not follow certain imposed patterns, allowing the possibility to choose and to assume responsibility, option which is canceled by the rules imposed by law. In this regard, I mention Sandu Frunză's affirmation that the interpretation of advertising's role in consumer society in terms of a minimal ethics as a space where self-confidence, self-respect, and respect for others are crucial elements and emphasize the virtues of advertising as "part of a seduction aesthetic which functions as a cultural parameter for postmodern humanity." (Frunză, 2014, p. 145)

The paper attempts to emphasize the importance of the ethical debate as one of the most relevant frameworks used when investigating the place, role and influence of advertising on children in contemporary society. This is mainly due to the fact that children represent a special audience targeted by advertising message due to its inability to detect its persuasive dimension, as well as due to the fact that this area of advertising witnessed an unprecedented development in recent decades. The children's vulnerability to the advertising message is an ongoing subject of debate and is translated in the implementation of regulations which greatly vary both in terms of the nature of the documents addressing the phenomenon – laws,

codes – and in terms of how the practice of advertising to children is interpreted.

At the same time, my analysis stresses that in establishing the limits and conditions under which this practice is carried out we must take into account the specific conditions of postmodern society, where the impact of advertising is increasingly complex and where the advertising communication model has penetrated major social spheres. Given that the logic of commodification is so present that “it becomes impossible to continue thinking of culture as a reserved and uncontaminated terrain”, and the space of commodities becomes “a domain which regulates human relations, as well as the locus on to which conflicts between social projects have been displaced” (Matellart, 1991, p. 208) it is mandatory that, beyond the adoption of certain measures to protect children and other vulnerable groups against advertising messages, we acknowledge the importance of advertising communication in a hyper-consumption society in which the model of persuasive communication infiltrates into all the essential areas of social and cultural life, transforming contemporary culture into a promotional one.

Acknowledgment

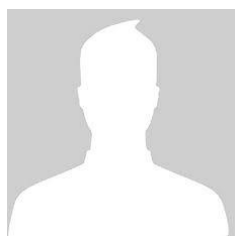
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Biodata



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