

Why to study children's views on advertising ethics: arguments from the literature on advertising ethics

Bauwens, J. & Lissens, S.

Executive Summary

The full article substantiating this executive summary is currently going through a review process and can therefore not be published integrally.

Objective:

One of the major premises of the AdLit project composes of the incorporation of a moral dimension into the model of advertising literacy. Therefore, an academic literature study was carried out to explore the existing knowledge on children's views on advertising ethics, i.e. whether, to what extent and how these are researched and what the findings are. Considering morality and moral reasoning as the subjective judgments on ethical -in this case advertising- issues, 'child* moral*/ethic*' and adver*' were taken as key concepts to guide the search. In some instances, findings from other, more general advertising research (e.g. focusing on attitudes, advertising literacy, ...) are presented to counter or exemplify the statements.

Categorization of the existing research:

The 3c categorization to identify the risks and opportunities related to children's online behavior (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009) served as a starting point to map the academic knowledge in the field. Three more categories were added for reasons of applicability to the advertising context.

Important to note, research themes and studies often touch upon several of these categories at the same time. The categorization is adopted mainly to serve the clarity of the report.



1. Contact



2. Content



3. Conduct



4. Commodity



5. Control



6. Consumption

1. Contact

The majority of the research is instigated by the imbalanced power relations that arise, namely the frequency and nature of the contacts that are made between the powerful marketers and -in these cases considered as such- powerless, vulnerable children. In the literature on the frequency and nature of the contacts that are made, the focus often lies on the kinds 'unfair' targeting techniques that are used, such as premiums, celebrity endorsement and data tracking.

2. Content

The advertising messages often give rise to ethical consideration. Stereotypical portrayals of ethnicity, gender, beauty and success on the one hand and the use of fear or sex appeals on the other have led to -often content analysis based- research. Likewise, studies

on the skepticism towards advertising, i.e. the truthfulness of the advertising claims that are made, belong to this category.

3. Conduct

The underlying motive for research on advertising ethics deals with the consequences of advertising (in all its aspects) for children's behavior or conduct. Studies or theorizations include the relation between advertising exposure and, for example, materialistic attitudes, criminal activities and family conflicts (e.g. pester power).

4. Commodity

Whereas the kind of product that is advertised could be included in the content category, it was decided to add a separate category to indicate the particular commodities that cause ethical concern. Sinful products like tobacco and alcohol still attract a lot of attention. The last decade has also seen the advent of other kinds of worrisome products: sugar-rich beverages and (fatty) foods. Studies within this category focus on effects or the relationships between preferences for certain commodities and exposure to advertising.

5. Control

A part of this category ties up closely to the previous one. Control refers to studies on/evaluations of existing or lacking rules and regulations, which primarily focus on the mentioned harmful products. The other part of this category is composed of explorations and evaluations of self-regulatory frameworks. Marketing and advertising companies or departments are consulted through means of questionnaires or qualitative research designs (e.g. ethnography) to explore how they, both individually and on the company level, deal with possible ethical issues.

6. Consumption

Consumption here does not refer to the act of purchasing an actual commodity. It takes at its center the creative consumption of the advertising text as well as the advertised product. Key questions are how and why child-consumers make use of advertising to acquire social and product information, to be entertained, to construct social relations and create personal identities. Put differently, research in this category sheds light on what the children do with advertising's symbolic meanings.

Absent research approaches:

Throughout the research review and categorization of the existing studies, three research questions/approaches were identified as absent or underrepresented.

1. The positive aspects of advertising

Little attention is being paid to the positive contributions of advertising. Even though risk factors and unwanted consequences pose more stringent ethical objections than positive elements, these latter should be equally accounted for, especially when the primary goal is to empower (child) consumers. Only when both good and bad aspects of advertising are known, consumers can critically process instances of commercial communication. The category 'consumption' was added for that reason: even though positive approaches theoretically could be found in every other category, the fact that this is not the case was taken as the justification to classify the few studies in a separate category.

2. The children's views on advertising ethics

Except for the consumption category, research rarely consults the children. When children are the respondent group, the focus often shifts to advertising literacy that focuses on cognitive and attitudinal/emotional dimensions. Children are rarely challenged to take reflective stances towards the advertising contact, content, conduct, commodity and control.

3. Other than in the consumption category anew, very little qualitative research has been done in any of the matters, although from a moral-philosophical point of view it is recommended to yield child experiences and insights through more participative methods such as in-depth interviews or focus groups.

When exploring respondents/children's argumentations and explanations on certain judgments, methods such as in-depth interviews or focus groups.