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# The Ethics of Advertising to Children

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<p>This thesis focuses on the ethics of advertising to children. It attempts to challenge the widespread assumption that marketing to children is unethical. Many academic papers on the topic discuss what should be done to protect children from marketers but not why the protection is necessary. The thesis is relying on secondary research and makes use of existing research to reach a conclusion. It is comprised of a comprehensive literature review that introduces the reader to the topic of ethics and proceeds to demonstrate the discourse around marketing to children and the morality around it. A discussion based on the evidence presented in the literature review will follow. The analysis of the literature review concludes that based on current literature while more qualitative research is needed to understand the effects of modern marketing on children, it is premature to conclude that marketing to children is unethical relying on the current research.</p>	
Keywords	Ethics, marketing ethics, business ethics, children, advertising, marketing to children

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## 1 Introduction

When a person wakes up, they are immediately bombarded with different adverts. After merely checking social media feeds on a smart phone or turning on the TV to watch the morning news, dozens of adverts have already been blasted for the person to see. Any magazine or newspaper that is read, radio that is turned on, or billboard that is driven past expose the person to an influx of different adverts. Even some subscription platforms that promise to have no adverts after paying the subscription fee, such as Netflix and HBO Nordic, will display adverts for new shows and other releases. Some content creators on different social media platform are called influencers due to their capacity to influence their followers to buy products they advertise. Every outlet seems to represent an agenda - whether it is a biased news broadcasting network willing to put their morals aside to push the ideals of their preferred political party or a company that uses advertising to convince consumers to buy their offering rather than the competitor's.

From any standpoint, it is evident that advertising has a key role in economy and in political climate (Navon, 2017). Adverts are used to finance events, broadcasting companies, news providers, and independent content creators. Marketing has established an important role even on a political level where election campaigns can often turn into marketing campaigns for each candidate (Bergadaá, 2007). This means that, in addition to companies, also the world leaders are using the practice of marketing and it has an integral part in who runs the world. A great marketing campaign can lead to more voters and subsequently more power for the individual that was the subject of the campaign.

Although children are consumers just as much as their parents are (Walker Smith, 2014), there is no question that some ethical issues arise with targeting this less experienced group of people to sell them products. Since there is no escape from adverts, it is important to discuss if children should be protected from flawed messages or if teaching them media literacy from a young age is enough. It might be the responsibility of parents to teach their children the ways to navigate and understand media better. On the other hand, the responsibility could fall on advertisers who use tactics to target the children who they know are not as experienced with media as older groups of people. In addition, the role of government should be considered as well.

Because of the rapid development of non-traditional media such as social media platforms and their growing impact on society, children and adults alike must learn to adjust to the new circumstances. Social media is taking over the world, and a great example of this are the numerous tweets sent out by the former United States president Donald Trump that kept the world on their toes following his every move. The access that Twitter provided to such an eminent and powerful person to communicate with regular individuals was unprecedented and showed how much impact social media can have in not just a person's life but also in world history. This also works the other way around as not only celebrities have social media presence but so do the majority of people living in Western society and that also includes children.

Furthermore, there is no escaping the fact that media literacy is a vital skill in the fast-changing world. Because children are growing up such an environment, they may have a better understanding of new media than their parents even though they might not have the needed media literacy skills to navigate upcoming messages. Young generations have a completely different experience of growing up than their parents before them. They may be able to use the newest electronic devices better than their parents who may not even know all the new ways that marketers may target their own children online. It has become evident that children face a lot of marketing tailored specifically for them. As parents and children are trying to navigate this new environment, it is crucial to question the practice of marketing to children and the ethical issues surrounding it.

As the unprecedented access that marketers have to children escalates the need to consider the ethical implications of the practice, this thesis will tackle this issue. Do children require extra protection from marketers, or should they be able to face the outpouring of adverts on their own? Who is responsible of teaching media literacy? Is the practice of marketing to children ethical in itself? These are the questions that this thesis will examine. Nevertheless, in an environment where not only marketers have ample access to children but also children have access to consumer markets unlike before, the need to discuss the ethical implications is very prominent. As children face more advertising in their daily lives, this discussion is inevitable.

Many researchers begin their research from the point of view that marketing to children is not ethical or at least with the belief that children should be provided some protection from adverts. However, while there is a lot of literature on the subject of ethical marketing to children, there are not many articles answering the underlying question rather than

just begin the discussion from a certain standpoint. It is crucial to consider if this assumption itself is correct that marketing to children is in fact unethical. If academics are basing their research on the assumed unethicality of marketing to kids, it is important to challenge this to validate the research and bring other views into the discussion if it is necessary.

Currently, most countries have certain restrictions on marketing to children, some more strict than others. This, as mentioned before, suggests that the collective understanding around the world on the subject is that children should be provided some protection from advertisements. The question of how or what type of restriction are place will not be discussed further but the question of why or even if regulations should be enforced is on the forefront of this thesis. As ethicality is a subjective issue, this thesis will attempt to discuss different possibilities in as neutral way as possible. In the end, the conclusions that will be drawn could seem controversial due to the personal nature of one's ethical views. The thesis is based on current literature that is available on the subject and will attempt to find a consensus in the current debate regarding the ethicality of marketing to children.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Ethics**

Finding an exhaustive answer to the question if advertising to children is ethical is rather difficult, because of the vastly different views on ethics and even the different definitions of what ethics means that exist in the world. If these issues are not be agreed upon, the task of finding any definite solutions seems to be very unlikely. The word *ethics* originates from the Greek word *ethos* that could be translated to mean character in English (Thiroux and Krasemann, 2012). Ethics is a branch of philosophy and is associated with the study of right and wrong, good and bad (Thiroux and Krasemann, 2012). Furthermore, it is the study of morality that does not necessarily seek to find definitive answers on ethical questions but to examine them by using different theories and perspectives (Kotro et al., 2018). However, in spoken language the word ethics is often misused as the quote below confirms.

*"Some years ago, sociologist Raymond Baumhart asked business people, "What does ethics mean to you?" Among their replies were the following:*

*"Ethics has to do with what my feelings tell me is right or wrong."*

*"Ethics has to do with my religious beliefs."*

*"Being ethical is doing what the law requires."*

*"Ethics consists of the standards of behavior our society accepts."*

*"I don't know what the word means.""*

(Velasquez et al., 1987, p. 623)

Moreover, ethics is related to moral values and responsibility (Thiroux and Krasemann, 2012). As the word ethics can be misunderstood and misused widely, other important words such as right and wrong or good and bad can also be used in spoken language as nonmoral terms (Thiroux and Krasemann, 2012). For example, when a person states that their food was bad, the word *bad* does not have any moral meaning in this context. Because of the differences of usage of these certain words between spoken language and in the context of the science of ethics, it is important to distinguish this significant difference before the discussion of the topic. If something is morally good, it means that it is good just as it is and not just utilised to pursue something else. (Kotro et al., 2018).

Morality describes the conceptualisation of what is morally good or bad (Kotro et al., 2018). The word can refer to the views of an individual or a bigger group. Even though everyone makes decisions in their daily life that have ethical implications, they might not be aware of the moral dilemmas surrounding each action. It is also possible that people tend to state a moral judgment as a fact, even though often these definite judgments are based on a subjective opinion (Benn, 1998). For example, the phrase "eating animals is wrong" is based on attitude of the person saying it. In fact, "wrongness" is not a property of which any true statements can be made (Benn, 1998). Furthermore, values are something that a person finds morally good and worthy of pursuit (Kotro et al., 2018), such as freedom, love, family, or fashion. A young age does not prevent a child to develop values, which means that even a small child might value owning the newest and trendiest toy over other aspects of their life. This is something that marketers can easily

play to their advantage. Furthermore, marketing itself can have an effect on what children learn to value from a young age due to the nature of messages that they are exposed to.

In the book *Ethics: Approaching Moral Decisions* from 2007, Arthur F. Holmes states that ethics is in many ways related to religion more closely than to social science. In the book about Christian ethics, this is of course not a surprising stand to take. Although it proves how different sources can provide very deviant definitions on the very topic at hand. In a way, ethics does have to do with religion and even feelings and law, because these factors can guide morality and consequently ethical behaviour (Kotro et al., 2018), but ethics as a science is separate from religious impact. Schoeman (2014) takes a more practical approach to ethics. While she acknowledges the variant opinions and debate over the academic definition of ethics, she states that the condensed description of ethics is “the right thing to do” or more specifically “ethics is doing the right thing when no one is watching” (Schoeman, 2014, p. 2). Moreover, this interpretation still leaves blank the answer to the question on how the right thing is defined but brings up a definition that has an abundance of street value.

Since ethics as a science has evolved in the past decades, *applied ethics* have become more prominent (Benn, 1998). The debate over contemporary issues such as warfare or abortion would be considered applied ethics because the issues are more worldly and have considerable impact on people’s daily lives. While in earlier decades philosophers found only metaethics, the philosophical judgments on moral behaviour, to be of interest. In this thesis the focus will be on the formerly mentioned approach as children are continuously impacted on the decisions made by marketers in regards to adverts and messages they are putting out for children to see.

Ethics involves choices that are made both at home as well as at work. Creyer and Ross (1997) found that a company’s ethical behaviour can positively affect sales as it is a factor that some consumers consider when making a purchase decision. It can also affect the cost that a consumer is willing to disburse for a good or a service (Creyer and Ross, 1997). Evidently, having good moral standing and values could also be a positive asset for a company that can boost sales. This claim is supported by recent studies (Park, 2018). In fact, increasing expectations that consumers have of ethical behaviour by companies has led to a further examination of ethical corporate practices (Hogan, 2005). It could be debated whether sales-motivated ethical behaviour is ethical in itself because of the ulterior motive to give the business a boost or if any behaviour that could



be deemed more ethical is morally good regardless of the motive. Pettersson and Fjellstrom (2006) point out that as part of this change, responsible marketing is also required from companies to fulfil the expectations of consumers. For a brand to create loyal customer relationships, they are pushed toward ethical marketing (Pettersson and Fjellstrom, 2006). Furthermore, for some consumers to trust and have faith in a brand, they demand commitment to ethical marketing and other practices.

## 2.2 Ethics and marketing

In general, marketers are only interested in one type of person: the ones who will pay for their offering (Walker Smith, 2014). Whether these purchasers are part of a more vulnerable group of people such as senior citizens, disabled people, or children, marketers target them regardless. Marketers merely target the group that creates the demand for their product (Walker Smith, 2014). Targeting a certain group can be considered unethical in and of itself, but at the same time marketers are only able to operate in the environment that is presented to them.

If consumers believe that there are possible positive outcomes from marketers' work, it seems to lower the critical attitudes towards the profession and their practices (Charry and Demoulin, 2014). This means that public opinion of marketers could be swayed by the products they advertise. Alcohol and tobacco adverts can decrease the reputation of the entire profession in question. This is unfortunate considering that all the individuals working in the field have not decided to promote unhealthy or even harmful products but still face the backlash. Charry and Demoulin (2014) suggest that the more social and individual welfare enhancing products and services are advertised, the more favourably the profession will be viewed.

Drumwright and Murphy (2009) conclude that marketers face the challenge of creating commercial messages that are both true and effective in selling the product. While these two can be mutually exclusive, it is a fine line that people in the profession have to walk to achieve desired outcomes. The ethical dilemma of which to prefer, sales or the truth, can be an overbearing one. Industry leaders are very adamant on the fact that truth in advertising should not be an issue as it's the people's responsibility to make ethical decisions in the profession (Drumwright and Murphy, 2009).

In fact, Red Bull's slogan used to pledge that drinking the beverage would give the consumer wings. Naturally, the slogan was not rooted in real life and drinking the beverage would not result in the consumer growing a pair of wings. Because of this slogan, Red Bull ended up paying a 6.5-million-dollar settlement for false advertising in the United States (Duggan, 2014). This shows that even an egregious slogan such as that one can be found deceitful regardless of its outlandish nature and therefore Red Bull ended up paying for it. It is debatable whether an individual's media literacy skills should be examined if they truly believe the slogan, but especially for children, who have not had the chance to develop the required media literacy skills, such slogans can prove to be dangerous.

A single code of ethics for all marketers is not in use, but Payne and Pressley (2013) call for a more comprehensive and industry-wide code that could be used in examining all ethical dilemmas within the profession. Since an all-inclusive ethical code does not exist, it leaves the burden of determining the answer to each ethical question that is faced by marketers on the individual marketing professional or team. Consequently, there are many differences in how various marketers respond. This can create discourse between marketing professionals. Although determining an all-compassing ethical code could be a difficult task, it could lead to more transparent and comprehensive understanding as well as make self-regulation easier within the field. Nevertheless, it would create favourable effects for the society as a whole if marketers followed a field-wide code in addition to following local and international laws (Payne and Pressley, 2013).

Bergadaá (2007) finds that it is the individual marketer should be considered at least partly responsible for the ethical implications of advertising and furthermore its impacts on society. She argues that because marketers are at the forefront of this debate, they should be held to a high ethical standard and expected to use their free will in decision-making situations (Bergadaá, 2007). On the other hand, marketers who work for global companies often operate within guidelines which could limit their free decision-making in regards to the company's adverts. Furthermore, it is clear that a relationship between society and adverts exists. Adverts affect society and the moral values demonstrated by marketers have a significant impact on shaping the worldview of both children and adults.

Moreover, it is of importance to think of ethicality in another light as well. Marketer's own perspective and ability to connect their work and values is also very important. Cohen and Dromi (2018) argue that marketers identify themselves as a morally stigmatized

community. This why they require some positive feedback as well. For example, marketers need anecdotes about the good that their work produces (Cohen and Dromi, 2018). As the public often considers marketers to be unmoral, it is important for the community's own self-image to see the positive in their work. This need for a positive enforcement can also drive individuals to reach for more ethical behaviour on the job. In addition, it could lead to a need of self-justification and modification of narratives by individual marketers (Cohen and Dromi, 2018) which doesn't necessarily mean that a person's actions can be considered in any way moral even if they perceive so themselves.

In the age of non-traditional media, such as social networks, the question of transparency in marketing has been raised. Drumwright and Murphy (2009) bring up a blog that came across as a two-person project about travelling around the US and staying in Walmart parking lots while in actuality the blog was a marketing plot created by a marketing agency financed by Walmart. The action of misrepresentation of the blog can be perceived as unethical as the true goal of the site is not transparent. It requires advanced media literacy to be able to critically evaluate the intentions of individual content that does not freely explain the promotional aims. This sort of behaviour can put children and adults alike in danger of misreading the messages and not understanding the underlying intent. It should be noted that in the new media participation is an integral part of any child's experience growing up (Walker Smith, 2014). Children are brought up in an environment where online presence is almost expected. Relationships with people extend to social media platforms which creates peer pressure to be online. This cycle creates an opportunity for marketers to reach these children where they are interacting with each other. Evidently, due to the fast evolvement of media, no norms have been established (Drumwright and Murphy, 2009).

Product placement is a way for adverts to fly under radar. Auty and Lewis (2004) discovered that a mere clip can affect the choices that people who have seen it make in regards to food and drinks. When groups of children, who were shown a clip that included some Pepsi soda, were offered a choice between Pepsi and Coca Cola, a significant amount of the group exposed to product placement reached for the advertised soda (Auty and Lewis, 2004). The implicit memory of seeing a product is the reason for the choice. Interestingly, age did not seem to make a difference in the effects of product placement (Auty and Lewis, 2004).

### 2.3 Marketing to children

The public opinion of adverts targeting children based on current literature could be described as quite hostile against marketers. Especially different parent activist groups and associations that are fighting for children's rights are concerned with companies that choose to target children. These actors are also big supporters of more regulations and government action while many marketing professionals want to shift the responsibility to parents and schools to educate children to respond better to adverts starting from a young age.

Children are consumers in the same way as their parents (Walker Smith, 2014) which is why marketers choose to target the group. However, children have a decreased ability to apply the required criticism in their reactions to adverts compared to older people (Davidson, 2002). Consequently, it is important for marketers to consider children as both dependant social actors as well as apprentice-consumers (De La Ville, 2014). There is no denying that children can be a lucrative group to focus on for marketers. To mention a few examples, toys, theme parks, and sweets are products that are of significant interest to children. In fact, the young consumers view over 3000 adverts per day from different platforms. In only one year, a child sees a cumulative number of over a million adverts (Pacini, 2014).

In addition, children have a significant impact on the choices that are made by their parents (Walker Smith, 2014). This leads to what Dan Pacini (2014, p. 35) calls the "commercialisation of childhood". As non-traditional media is growing, it is evident that children today are growing up in a very different world than 50 or even 20 years ago. Because of the earning potential, marketers target children as any other group of consumers. It should be considered if it is worth it to regulate the marketers in order to protect children or to embrace the new environment and teach children to live with the new normal. Hogan (2005) found that marketing professionals are very aware of the motivations of children and how important it is to fit in with the current trends. Naturally, marketing professionals have a better understanding of children than children have of marketing. This could create a dangerous power dynamic between the two parties as marketers know how to use the vulnerabilities of children to their advantage.

O'Brien et al. (2015) conducted a study into alcohol advertising in Australia. While there are regulations that prohibit alcohol advertising during times a lot of children are watching

TV, excluding sports programs, the study showed that the regulations do not sufficiently protect children from these types of adverts (O'Brien et al., 2015). As children respond positively to emotionally charged adverts (O'Brien, 2015), the alcohol products that are marketed leave a good impression and can lead to future consumption. This study shows that children can be exposed to unwanted marketing even when steps are taken to decrease the possibility of that happening.

As O'Sullivan (2005) point out, only under 30% of children's viewing of television programming is actual children's programming. This creates significant difficulty for regulators. While it is possible to decrease or have significant provisions for marketing to children, it is impossible to make sure that the vulnerable group does not have access to spaces that have unregulated advertising. For example, a child watching adult's sports programming as shown in the study by O'Brien et al. (2015) can be expose to content that regulations are trying to protect them from.

Many websites reach children by "one-to-one marketing" (Austin and Reed, 1999). As the sites are created to hold children's attention for a long period of time, it allows companies to form a personal relationship with the child using the website. Great examples of this are Barbie Collector's Club that is found on the Barbie website and created by Mattel (Austin and Reed, 1999). The fact that children are able to access sites such as this one is problematic on its own due to the fact that it is not guaranteed that parent supervision is available (Austin and Reed, 1999). This issue has even gotten more prominent over the years. The abilities of children to make decisions can be compromised due to the lack of sufficient information provided by websites that are aiming to reach sales.

Social media influencers are a new way of companies to reach their target group. For example, YouTube content creators can be paid to promote products to their viewers. This tactic can be very deceitful due to the relationship that fans, that in this case are children, can develop with their favourite influencer and view them as reliable friends. For example, deceitful sales tactics were used by brothers Jake and Logan Paul who have a cumulative 43 million subscribers on YouTube (Logan Paul, n.d., and Jake Paul, n.d.) most of whom are young children (Stokel-Walker, 2018). The Paul brothers target a young audience with their videos and a manipulative strategy of mentioning and promoting their own merchandise on the videos continuously (Stokel-Walker, 2018). Because the viewers might not identify that they are watching adverts that are hidden in

other content, the transparency is completely missing from this context. It is crucial to discuss how ethical this lack of transparency is, since traditional media is not the norm anymore for young children. Pacini (2014) even points out that children have rarely any spaces in their lives which are not commercialised. For example, many schools have vending machines with certain sponsored drinks or even show some films that include adverts during class (Pacini, 2014). Children are not necessarily prepared to be exposed to messages with ulterior motives at a safe environment such as school which creates a captive audience.

Due to the growing brand awareness among children that is created through marketing messages, peer pressure can guide the market behaviour of children even from a young age (Pettersson and Fjellstrom, 2006) which demonstrates how premature the effects of societal pressure to fit in can appear. Furthermore, childhood is the optimal time for marketers to target youthful consumers so that children can establish the desired brand values at a young age. Subsequently, brand preferences learned during childhood are often expected to remain later in life as well (Pettersson and Fjellstrom, 2006). This provides a substantial motive for marketers to focus on attracting children to their brand. Because brand loyalty is developed already as a child (Harris et al., 2009), the early exposure to adverts is crucial for companies to develop life-lasting customer relationships. As children grow older, their capacity to deal with more complex situations increases as well (Bergadaá, 2004). This would suggest that children will inevitably learn to respond more critically to adverts. Although Harris et al. (2009) state that it is crucial to evaluate this assumption when conducting research to avoid stagnation and question the current knowledge that has been prominent since the 1970s.

#### 2.4 Ethics and marketing to children

Austin and Reed (1999) state as a fact that the lack of analytical skills that children have compared to adults is grounds for special treatment and safeguarding. In interviews conducted by Hogan (2005), marketing professionals considered the practice of marketing to children who are school age or older to be ethical as long as the lacking ability of media literacy was taken into account. Furthermore, marketers find that their own morals do not let them cross the line from ethical to unethical practices in marketing to children (Hogan, 2005).

Walker Smith (2014) points out that age doesn't have a significant effect on the cognitive capacities to learn media literacy. Making questionable decisions against own interest is usual for adults due to inherent biases. Frequently, adults are not aware of these biases more than children are (Walker Smith, 2014). On the other hand, Pacini (2014) argues that younger children under the age of eight are more likely to not comprehend the undertones of deceitful advertisements compared to older kids and grown-ups.

Many marketers do not realize that children are not just small adults (Paine et al., 2002). This dangerous attitude can lead to not understanding the differences between undeveloped media literacy skills of children and adults. However, Walker Smith (2014) argues that it is necessary for children to practice being consumers. The consumer experience naturally includes advertising, so in this perspective it could be considered an asset that marketers target children as it creates continuous learning opportunities for kids that parents and other adults can take advantage of.

Austin and Reed (1999) bring up different guidelines and regulations enforced in the United States by different actors such as Direct Marketing Association and Council of Better Business Bureaux. Since the article is over 20 years old, these guidelines are outdated due to the development of new media. As the collection and use of personal data has increased and become significantly more important in the last 20 years which means that this observation is still current. The article describes the danger that children, who are not capable of fully comprehending how their data is handled, face on the internet. For example, some children's websites use entering a contest as a way to collect data which is subsequently used for marketing purposes (Austin and Reed, 1999). Regardless of the age group targeted, full disclosure of what the collected data is used for seems a reasonable expectation.

Sjöberg (2015) conducted research on how infants respond to adverts. She found that it was in fact the child's character which urges and compels the caregivers' expenditure rather than the marketer (Sjöberg, 2015). This suggests, that especially in case of young infants, the caregivers are often the ones who seek to spend on goods and services for their children. Particularly mothers seemed to operate within a fear of not supplying their child with the best conditions (Sjöberg, 2015). This shows how much impact marketing that is targeted to children can have on the parents. Fear can lead parents to spend more and perpetuate materialistic values on to their children. In this case, parents are making the conscious decision to appreciate these values.



On the other hand, Pettersson and Fjellstrom (2006) word the same fear as pressure that marketers put on caregivers to provide to their children with the advertised products, some of which may be the unhealthiest options on the market. The phrasing here is important. The marketers are putting out their message which parents and caregivers can perceive as pressure or created fear but projecting all the blame on the marketers seems inordinate. Adults have had their lives to uncover their biases and weaknesses in relation to adverts. As much as marketers are doing their job by putting out messages that push the company's agenda, the people receiving the messages should reconcile with the society that is ultimately built on advertising.

Evidence gathered from empirical studies suggest that there are some negative effects that can arise from exposure of children to adverts at a young age. It can lead to parent-child conflict (Pacini, 2014) as children may view adverts as a higher authority compared to their caregivers. In fact, situations such as this could lead to further conflict or, on the other hand, a possibility for mutual learning of both parties. In fact, providing too much protection from adverts can also backfire. If the children are taught from a young age that business is evil, they may foster this attitude toward adverts (Bergadaá, 2004). In any case, there is no escape from adverts for someone that is living in a Western society, so this type of attitude can drive a wedge between the trust in society and the individual.

#### 2.4.1 Effects of marketing to childhood obesity

During the literature review, it became evident that the most common worry that had risen from marketing to children was obesity. Many the articles indicated that the marketing of food has affected the rising number of overweight children around the world. By adding familiar characters from TV shows and games to packaging or adverts of unhealthy food, marketers are allegedly the reason behind the worldwide childhood obesity pandemic. Harris et al. (2009) state that no significant progress can be made to defeat the crisis until food and beverage marketing is silenced or even completely abolished.

In fact, the most typical products that are marketed to children in television are fast food chains, soda, toys, sweets, and sugary cereals (Pacini, 2014). Most of these are unhealthy products that can have a negative impact on the consumer's, in this case a child's, health. These adverts often focus on how amusing the product is or how great the flavour is rather than spreading true information on the product (Pacini, 2014).



Unhealthy food is often advertised as the more fun option that appeals to children (Pettersson and Fjellström, 2006). The danger is that children perceive this fun image of the product as unbiased reporting rather than be able to recognise motivations behind the message (Pacini, 2014).

Harris et al. (2009) find that there is scientifically sufficient evidence to suggest that marketing food to children can place their health at a high risk. Self-regulation has not been found sufficient in protecting the health of the vulnerable group of children as studies have shown the benefits of decreasing children's exposure to adverts (Harris et al., 2009). However, it should be pointed out that marketers can not assume full responsibility of the childhood obesity crisis as other factor such as the way children spend their free time has changed tremendously over the last couple decades (Pettersson and Fjellstrom, 2006). Many factors have affected the crisis. With modern children experiencing a rise in consumption of unhealthy food and have changed to a less active lifestyle sitting in front of a screen more often than going outside to play, it is inevitable that the effects of these problems create a cumulatively larger problem.

Using characters that have similar characteristics to the children targeted draws in the attention of kids (Hurwitz et al., 2019). An analysis of content in multiple platforms found that the use of characters with unhealthy food is relatively low. However, the amount of websites and applications targeting children is unexpectedly low, but the media uses characters to its advantage in drawing in the young consumers (Hurwitz et al., 2019). In turn, social marketing could also help to defeat the public health crisis. Schuster et al. (2016) found that a social marketing campaign that enthused caregivers and children to walk more had a significant positive effect on the attitudes toward walking to and from school. This suggests that the same method that is criticised for partly causing the crisis could also help to decrease the risk.

Although the correlation between viewing hours of television and unhealthy diets have been proven in multiple studies, it does not directly indicate causation (Harris et al., 2009). Although the persuasive effect that adverts have on children may make it more difficult for parents to deny the children the desired food (Pettersson and Fjellstrom, 2006). Once children begin to have more freedom to decide their food choices, this will inevitably increase the childhood obesity levels as the adverts targeted at children are often promoting products that are for example high in saturated fat or white sugar (Pettersson and Fjellstom, 2006).

### **3 Methodology**

This thesis uses existing material to find an answer to the question if marketing to children is ethical. The literature review provides a comprehensive overview of different research and opinions on the subject. Consequently, the thesis utilises a variety of resources that examine the topics of marketing to children, marketing ethics, and the combination of the two. The chosen material provides multiple perspectives on the issue ranging from textbooks and academic journal articles to more current newspaper articles.

Throughout the past decades marketing to children has already been an ethical issue discussed among academics, but it has never been a more prominent subject to discuss that in the current era of social media where marketers can reach children in a way that has not been experienced before and could provide a possibility to for marketers to interact with children without parental supervision. Therefore, papers discussing the issue can be found dating back decades. Considering that there have not been huge leaps forward in the discussion in the past years, older material also brings up valid points and offers different perspectives.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider the fact that many writings on the topic start out with the assumption that marketing to children should be limited or is in some regard unethical without further discussions why. This thesis challenges this presumed notion that marketing to children is inherently unethical, but not a lot of literature can be found that supports the side of advertisers, who want to market to children, in the discussion. It is largely agreed-upon that marketers act unethically while marketing to children. However, the biases of writers will be taken into consideration while evaluating the data the papers present and not the assumption they operate from. Critical analysis of the material is necessary to find a conclusion to the research question.

### **4 Discussion**

This section will aim to discuss the issue of marketing to children and the ethical implications based on evidence that has been gathered in the literature review. It can be concluded that the overwhelming response to the question if children should be protected from marketers is that it is necessary. Many parent-groups, children's psychologists, and more find it crucial that children require safeguarding with navigating through adverts

upon adverts every day. Although, not very surprisingly, marketers themselves offer pushback to this opinion.

To figure out the party that is ultimately responsible for the ethical implications of marketing to children a somewhat similar question to which came first: the chicken or the egg? Which started first: demand or marketing? It can be debated that marketers have merely followed the environment they are forced to operate within and were led to a lucrative target group in children which is the reason for marketing to children and cause of the alleged side effects of the practice. On the other hand, perhaps all the negative stigma around marketing began because marketers decided to ruthlessly target this more vulnerable and less knowledgeable group on people.

It should be considered if there is an argument to put regulations in place to protect children from marketers. Even with regulations in place for children's television programming, there is no denying that children will watch or unintentionally see adverts that are not intended for them. In general, whether children are specifically targeted or not, they will be exposed to marketing whether it is for toys or alcoholic beverages. Since it is unattainable to prevent children from viewing any type of commercial messages, the question is if it is worth the possible financial retribution to companies to regulate something that will inevitably happen after all. On the other hand, as even adults are continuously facing new advertising practices, it seems to be unreasonable to expect parents to handle the task of instructing children to react correctly to adverts. The same goes for governments that will have to take significant time to adjust legislation to new media and expectations. Due to this, it leaves a lot of weight on self-regulation among the marketers.

It could be concluded that the mere act of marketing to children is in fact not unethical in and of itself. However, it is crucial to consider the consequences of this action. When a child sees an advert for their favourite sugar-coated cereal which affects the child in a way that they start to prefer it over a healthier option, is this the ultimate responsibility of the marketer? While a child may not understand that their preference is ultimately derived from seeing the advert, parents should be able to make the connection. Although it could be unfair to leave the responsibility to parents and caregivers, since in addition to providing financial and emotional support, caregivers are expected to prepare children for life in all aspects. It is unreasonable to think that all parents have the time or even the know-how to educate their children on the topic of marketing.

The definition of ethics is not unambiguous for individuals as many define what it means through their own religion or viewpoint. Ethics is the study of right and wrong, but it is debatable if any issue can ever be found entirely ethical or not. In contrast to chemistry or math, the deeper meaning and understanding of ethics is often very subjective as what one might find right, another one disapproves. This is why even a question so simple such as “is it ethical to market to children?” can be more complicated to examine as there are many ways of viewing the problem, while for some people it is not even a problem.

The issue of moral relativism is ought to be brought up in this conversation. As there are cultural differences in food and customs for example, a person’s moral priorities are often shaped by their parents, peers, and the norms of the society they grew up in (Benn, 2018). If the moral implications of one action can be interpreted in multiple different ways dependent on a person’s cultural background, whose place is it to answer the question of what should be considered morally right?

It is crucial to recognize and consider the personal viewpoint as the writer of the thesis. My personal values and world view will be a factor in the research I conduct. Unfortunately, it is downright impossible to stay completely neutral, but the goal has been to consider the different types of evidence provided in literature review from which I will then conclude the results of this thesis. Although it may be possible that while moral relativism is true, there are some absolute non-moral truths. The debate between moral absolutism and moral relativism could be continued further, but we will continue to move forwards with the comprehension that there is no absolute right and wrong.

One common criticism that advertising receives is that it makes children too materialistic at a young age (Walker Smith, 2014). There are certainly many people who would agree with this statement. In this case, the problem is that while it can be a fact, this is still a judgment of values and not a scientific criticism (Walker Smith, 2014). While some people may not have materialistic values and hope to refrain from spreading the ideal, it is completely based on the value system of an individual person or a group to decide if this is in fact a morally wrong action to spread materialistic values. In a capitalistic Western society, materialism is omnipresent so it could be argued that it is positive that children are exposed to the value early on in life.

## 5 Conclusions

O'Sullivan (2005) calls for more qualitative studies on how children experience advertising around them. Because this area is not widely researched by qualitative standards, it is more difficult to consider the viewpoint of children in the discussion. Because the question on responsibility has come up several times in this thesis, while children should not be expected to learn media literacy by themselves, they should have a voice in the discussion of how marketing looks to them. Possibly this would create a better environment for adults to agree upon a solution of making marketing more comprehensible to children. Paine et al. (2002) suggests that ethics training should be required for all marketers that work with an audience that involves children. This is a great way for marketers to begin the discussion of what of their behaviour is ethical. If they are forced to discuss this, it could create a more positive environment that would encourage speaking out on ethical issues rather than staying silent.

Walker Smith (2014) suggests that marketers are not the ones to blame in this situation. Due to the environment that they are presented, marketers are merely doing the best they can with the given assets. According to his argument, the correct action for authorities to take is not to work against the marketing professionals but to work with them. Marketers are willing to go where the demand is so possibly with educating caregivers and children to make alternative choices as a consumer or even offering direct incentives towards the sale of desirable products (for example, healthy snacks and drinks), the marketers could be drawn to advertise goods and services with a more premise.

As the question of who is responsible for making sure children are not too disconcerted with adverts, the solutions vary abundantly. Sjöberg (2015) argues that there is a need for serious dialogue to address marketing to children. Marketers and parents as well as producers and third parties should be included in the discussion. The acknowledgement of the practice of marketing to children is vital and an open discourse is a great way to encourage parents and marketers to acknowledge the possibilities that it can offer to all parties.

On the other hand, Pettersson and Fjellstrom (2006) think that self-regulation by marketers paired with legal regulation could provide a sufficient solution to the problem. The addition of legal regulation is also prompted by organisations ran by parents.

Austin and Reed (1999) emphasise the responsibility that parents have on ensuring the safety of their children regarding unethical practices. While there are many parties that can assist children in the matter, they argue that ultimately the task falls on the parents.

It can't be dismissed that children have less experience than older consumers. They will grow up to become, such as the older generations now, a new generation of consumers. It may be argued that children deserve more respect than they are given when the ethicality of marketers targeting the young age groups is discussed. As is this a great age to create brand loyalty (Harris et al., 2009), children can also learn a lot from society and adverts when they are growing up. Sheltering children from the realities of the world may lead to young adults that are less capable of handling the overflow of adverts.

Democratic individualism grants people in the Western world an equal right to express interests, attitudes, and feelings (Bergadaá, 2004). An individual's rights extend so long as they do not restrict the rights of others. For example, hateful speech could cross the line to be unlawful, but mostly people are entitled to share and spread their own desired message both online and in person. This same protection of free speech should be allowed to marketers as well. Their message is a tool to achieve profit for their company. The protection of free representation of message is vital to maintain in order for the capitalistic democracy to stay afloat.

Studies show that the effect of product placement does not change with age (Auty and Lewis, 2004). There is an argument to consider about limiting marketing to children, because the marketing practice affects everyone regardless of their maturity in age. If we consider that there is no serious change in the effects on adults or children, then it seems illogical to decide to protect one group over the other. When all age groups are able to be persuaded in a similar way by marketers, the logical solution would be to limit advertising in general. Although due to the way Western society runs on adverts, this would not be a potential outcome.

Consequently, marketing to children should not be considered outright unethical. Children affect on purchase decisions their parents make. They will inevitably grow up to live in a world where they are surrounded by adverts as adults. Learning to understand the ulterior motives behind adverts is crucial and facing adverts as a child provides the opportunity to understand the difference between marketing messages and other communication. Nevertheless, research should continue to study the effects that

marketing has on children but deeming it completely unethical is a value statement rather than a fact supported by current literature.

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