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Children and the Skeptical Attitude toward Advertising. An Epistemological Evaluation

Abstract: This article has several distinct purposes: firstly, I will analyze the reasons why children end up being the target of advertising campaigns from an early age; secondly, I will assess the definite effects of advertising on children; thirdly, I will analyze if the audiences of advertising campaigns develop skeptical attitudes regarding the advertisements they come into contact with; fourthly, I will identify the factors that determine the skeptical attitude toward advertisements; fifth, I will identify and assess the kinds of skepticism that children might develop toward advertisements and whether these kinds of skepticism are real states that children’s minds can acquire. The thesis I want to argue is that most research on the possibility of children developing a skeptical attitude towards advertising operates with a diluted concept of skepticism, which has the consequence of identifying a greater number of skeptical children (and adults). A weakened concept of skepticism results in the lowering of the age at which children are declared skeptical and, consequently, fit to be exposed to advertising. Such scientific results, even if they spring from the honest intentions of scientific research, seem to serve the interests of companies that want to make young children legitimate targets of advertising on all channels.

Keywords: children, advertising, skepticism, brands, accuracy-based skepticism, motives-based skepticism, informational asymmetry.

1. Introduction

Omnipresent on television channels and in the digital sphere, advertising to children rarely arouses deep controversy among advertising communication specialists. Despite its trivialization, it is a practice that involves serious cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and ethical dilemmas

and challenges. Suppose children cannot understand and critically analyze an advertisement. In that case, if they cannot evaluate it from the perspective of their own needs, they can develop beliefs and behaviors that do not reflect their interests and desires. In other words, children exposed to advertising may lose some of their autonomy and freedom, traits closely related to human dignity. Moreover, lacking commercial discernment, children could be trained in practices harmful to their long-term health and practices harmful to relationships with family members or peers. On the other hand, if children can critically analyze an advertisement, if they can be skeptical about brand messages, then their commercial behaviors can be considered the result of a rational and conscious decision that takes into account their interests; under these conditions, the concerns of some of the psychologists who analyze the reception of advertising by children would be unfounded.

This article has five parts: in the first part I will analyze the reasons why children end up being the target of advertising campaigns from an early age; in the second part, based on existing research, I will evaluate the definite effects of advertising on children; in the third part I will analyze the extent to which the audiences of advertising campaigns develop skeptical attitudes regarding the advertisements they come into contact with; in the fourth part I will identify the factors that determine the skeptical attitude toward advertisements; in part five I will identify and assess the types of skepticism that children might develop toward advertising and whether these types of skepticism are real attitudes that children's minds can acquire. The thesis I want to argue is that most research on the possibility of children developing a skeptical attitude toward advertising operates with a diluted concept of skepticism, which has the consequence of identifying a greater and unrealistic number of skeptical children (and adults).

2. Children as target of advertising campaigns

As Valkenburg and Piotrowski argue, children are the target of advertising campaigns because they form three distinct consumer markets: a primary market, an indirect consumer market, and a future consumer market (Valkenburg & Piotrowski 2017, 137). The appearance of devices connected to the Internet and the familiarization of children from an early age with mobile phones and tablets have led many companies to use new communication channels to further lower the age at which children become targets of advertising campaigns. Therefore, if

some time ago children were the target of advertisements around the age of five, today there are campaigns aimed at children from the age of two. The unstated creed by which most advertisers are guided is to influence the behavior of individuals “from cradle to grave” (Valkenburg & Piotrowski 2017, 138). As James McNeal also pointed out, children are consumers of products and services 24/7/365, fulfilling the role of consumers from the day they are born (McNeal 2007, 357). Children are a primary market for advertising because they represent a group of consumers who gradually become aware of certain needs and because they become interested in certain products, which they eventually buy. An authentic consumer can understand his needs and preferences, evaluate, choose, and purchase a product, compare the product he is interested in with similar offers, aware of the personal and social significance of the purchased brand. Children are primary consumers because, gradually, they meet all the conditions listed above; step by step, they come to possess most of the needs that an adult has and become aware of their existence. To the general human needs can be added some specific to childhood: the need for play, the need for stimulation, the heightened need to satisfy curiosity, the need for involvement, the increased need for emotional connection, etc. In addition, it should be emphasized that, as a distinct group, children become the target of advertising campaigns due to some very special psycho-cognitive characteristics: by their age-specific curiosity, they manifest an unusual receptivity to the messages intended for them, entering during receiving messages from a screen in what is called “attentional inertia” (Anderson et. al., 1979). Movement, colors, and favorite animated characters transform a video advertisement to children into an irresistible message.

Around the age of two, children begin to express energetically their needs, desires, and preferences. This is how they end up nagging their parents, crying, or having fits of blind rage in the shops. After the age of six, children become able to delay gratification, but they also begin to use more elaborate strategies to convince their parents: counterargument, flattery, the promise of appropriate behavior, pity, etc. With increasing age, such strategies give better results (Valkenburg & Piotrowski 2017, 139). According to Valkenburg and Cantor, around the age of five children begin to purchase things on their own. First, they are assisted by their parents, then they make the purchase themselves. Young children, up to eight years old, cannot evaluate a product and compare alternatives (they usually fixate on a detail of the product); after eight years, children can evaluate a product in detail, but, the two researchers

believe, also the advertisement through which the product is promoted (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001). Therefore, given that children are gradually becoming capable of understanding their needs, making purchases on their own, and evaluating alternatives to a particular product, it has justified marketers to treat them as a primary and distinct market (Valkenburg & Piotrowski 2017, 139-141). Irresistible commercial messages combined with the presence of money in own pocket and the gradual increase of his autonomy transform the child into a genuine buyer. Evaluating several studies carried out on the American market, Jennifer Hill finds that spending by children between the ages of 2 and 14 amounts to more than 500 billion dollars annually, and in 2003, 33 million American children spent an average of 103 dollars a week. These figures enable the author to conclude that shopping has become the main activity of children in their free time (Hill 2016, 16). We have reasonable grounds to believe that things are the same today in all developed countries with a higher than average per capita income.

As most researchers believe, the age of eight is when children's skepticism toward advertisements begins to manifest itself. Developing their ability to understand several perspectives simultaneously, children end up criticizing commercials for their lack of humor, for the poor acting of the actors; at the same time, they also understand, albeit to a lesser extent, the persuasive intent of advertisements, a reason for mistrust and skepticism towards advertising. Finally, children also come to understand the social and cultural meanings of the products promoted through advertisements. Children gradually come to understand that they are seen and evaluated by others through the clothes they wear, the mobile phones they own, and the music they listen to (Valkenburg & Piotrowski 2017, 140-141). When children become aware that their identity is directly related to the purchase and possession of certain brands, their consumer status has fully crystallized.

Companies finance advertising campaigns to children for a second reason: children also form an indirect consumer market; in other words, children greatly influence the purchases made by their parents. James McNeal believes that children influence not only the family shopping choices (food, clothing, furniture, computers, televisions, etc.), but also the choice of restaurants, vacation destinations, and even the choice of a new car. Children become influencers within their own families from a very early age, when, using a wide range of sounds, they can make it clear that they agree or disagree with a certain purchase option (McNeal 2007, 358). This situation is attributed to the fact that families have

gradually moved from an authoritarian parenting style to a democratic one; today understanding, equality, and compromise are the values that reign in every civilized family (Valkenburg & Piotrowski 2017, 141-142).

Third, companies finance advertising campaigns for children because the children of today will be the adults of the future, the mature consumers of tomorrow. Children are the consumers with the most purchases on the horizon: earning the loyalty of a child equals gaining a long-term buyer. Consequently, as James McNeal also points out, preschoolers are targeted with advertising by soft drink manufacturers, elementary school children are targeted by computer manufacturers, and teenagers are targeted by car manufacturers and brokerage firms (McNeal 2007, 358). Adults remain largely loyal to the brands they prefer as children. Cynthia and Robert Hite showed that most children develop preferences for certain brands from a very young age: two-thirds of children between the ages of three and six request their parents the same brands every time (Hite & Hite, 1995). Other studies claim that in early childhood, children change their preferences quite often, but with adolescence, children stabilize their preferences. More than half of people in their thirties were still buying the same brands they used at sixteen. In general, teenagers seem to be more loyal to intimate brands - deodorant, shampoo, - while the brands used to express personal identity and group membership change with age (Valkenburg & Piotrowski 2017, 142-143).

In conclusion, as primary buyers, influencers within their own families, and future buyers, children have greater market potential than any other demographic group. This explains the advertising industry's efforts to send messages to children anytime, anywhere (McNeal 2007, 359).

3. Intended and unintended effects of advertising on children

From children's reception and processing of advertising messages results in two types of effects: intended and unintended effects. The intended effects of advertisers are to increase brand awareness, change and crystallize brand attitude and preference, and intensify children's behavior as direct or indirect buyers. All existing studies show that high ad exposure results in high brand recognition. Children's unrestricted access to Internet-connected devices and television programs and, implicitly, unrestricted access to advertising leads to the recognition of more brand logos, the recognition of more characters in advertisements, and the recognition of more packaging of the promoted products (Fischer et al. 1991; Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2005). Thus, children's exposure to

video ads increases brand recognition but is not a strong predictor of brand recall, at least for children up to six years of age (Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2005). At the same time, studies indicate a positive correlation between ad exposure and brand attitude, especially if brands respond to pressing needs. The most important variable identified in these studies was the attractiveness of the ad; in other words, it mattered whether or not the children who viewed the ad liked it, not how often they viewed it (Atkin, 1975). Finally, studies confirm that children exposed to advertisements of certain brands will have attitudes and preferences positively influenced by these advertisements and will ask their parents to buy them the brands in question more often (Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2003).

Children's exposure to advertising also causes unintended effects: materialistic and consumerist attitudes, escalating conflicts between parents and children (Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2003), and increasing incidence of obesity and overweight (Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2003; Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017, 149-153). The cultivation theory of consumerism conceived by George Gerbner claims that advertising implicitly promotes a materialistic philosophy of life, the idea that being the owner of quality products is an important personal attribute, and that the products in the property provide access to beauty, happiness, and success. So far there is no empirical study that clarifies the relationship between materialism and advertising: it is not yet possible to indicate whether a materialistic attitude makes some children more receptive to advertising or whether receptiveness to advertising causes a materialistic attitude (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017, 149-150). On the other hand, as Buijzen and Valkenburg show, at least five studies confirm the existence of a correlation between exposure to advertising and an increase in the number of conflicts between children and parents (Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2003).

Last but not least, the consumption of advertising is positively correlated with the increase in the incidence of obesity among children; researchers (Buijzen, Schuurman & Bomhof, 2008) have identified at least three behavioral patterns that reinforce the idea of a correlation between advertising consumption and obesity in children: (1) exposure to food brand advertisements arouses appetite and causes consumption of promoted brands (especially in high-income families) or of food in general (especially in low-income families); in the case of children from low-income families, a direct proportional relationship was found between the amount of advertising received by children and the amount of food consumed; (2) advertising consumption discourages physical activity; (3) the more media content children consume, including

advertising, the more likely they are to snack on foods with a higher energy content during viewing (Buijzen, Schuurman & Bomhof 2008, 236-237). Moreover, the consumption of advertising for food products in which female characters with an attractive physical appearance appear correlates with the appearance and long-term installation of eating disorders (anorexia, for example), especially among girls (Ogletree et. al., 1990). Finally, adolescents exposed to alcohol advertising end up consuming larger amounts of alcoholic beverages, even though youth drinking cannot be causally explained by exposure to advertising alone (Atkin et al., 1984; Gunter, 2016).

These unintended effects derive from children's reduced ability to critically analyze advertisements from an early age and develop a skeptical attitude toward them. The more children's skepticism develops with age, the greater the possibility of removing these unintended effects of advertising. Hence the ethical and therapeutic importance of cultivating through education and the development by children of a skeptical attitude toward advertising.

4. General considerations regarding consumer skepticism toward advertising

Before analyzing the dynamics of children's skepticism toward advertising, we will make some clarifications regarding skepticism toward advertising as a general phenomenon. Most consumers believe that advertising is a negative, parasitic, deceptive, and manipulative communication phenomenon. As Obermiller & Spangenberg also point out, adults come to believe that the fundamental purpose of advertising is to generate false needs and desires, to convince people to buy useless brands; the basic tool by which advertising would achieve these goals would be false claims. Therefore, most consumers' skepticism toward advertising is a constant over time and space (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). If some adults do not necessarily consider advertising claims to be false, most consider them unrealistic, hyperbolizing, exaggerated, boastful, and consequently difficult or impossible to believe. It can be considered that consumer skepticism towards advertising can also be installed as an epistemic reaction to the lack of motivation of adults in processing advertising messages.

Nelson (1974) believes that consumer skepticism arises because of information asymmetry between the producer and the buyer. The manufacturer, even if he knows almost everything about the product sold,

is not interested in providing complete information to consumers; being only interested in selling, he will give buyers only the information that will increase sales. Therefore, Nelson believes, that adult consumers, aware of this situation, tend to be skeptical of advertising claims, except for those they can verify before purchasing the product (Nelson, 1970). Thus, by hiding information about products and brands, manufacturers and advertisers have intentions that cannot be easily deduced by buyers and often make claims that cannot be verified by consumers. The major source of consumer skepticism towards advertising can be found in this intentional and informational asymmetry between producers / advertisers on the one hand and consumers on the other. This asymmetry leads to a lack of transparency regarding the ingredients or technologies used to make the promoted products, to a lack of transparency regarding the intentions and foundation of the advertising claims; the lack of transparency and implicit bias in advertisers' reasoning leads to a robust skepticism among adults about advertising in general.

S. Koslow (2000) became aware of these connections and distinguished between accuracy-based skepticism and skepticism based on people's suspicions about advertisers' motives (motives-based skepticism). But Koslow is convinced that advertising skepticism is a kind of acquired defense mechanism, one that comes to be independent of one exposure to ads or another; adults possess such a protective mechanism because they internalize the view that consumers and brand owners have different interests. Therefore, adults' skepticism of advertisers' claims does not derive only from the possibility that they are inaccurate or deeply motivated, but derives from a cognitive defense mechanism, crystallized over time, that protects consumers from possible deceptions by advertisers. As other researchers have shown, consumers become skeptical because they understand that the selling propositions in advertisements reflect the interests of brand owners, and their desires to maximize their profits, rather than their interests as consumers (Heath & Heath, 2008; Calfee & Ringold, 1994). Some research shows that adults' skepticism can decrease if advertisers' claims can be easily verified (Feick & Gierl, 1996), but most research indicates that adults' skepticism toward advertising remains constant, regardless of the evidence provided to support advertising claims (Pollay & Mittal, 1993; Beltramini & Stafford, 1993). Perhaps this robust adult skepticism of advertising is also an epistemic defensive reaction to the enormous amount of advertising that an adult is forced to process daily.

The skepticism of adult consumers has a connection, not always conscious, with the role attributed to advertising in the production and dissemination of the materialistic attitude in contemporary society, but also with how advertising influenced the modification of values in society or their marginalization (Boush, Friestad & Wright, 2009). In other words, adults are skeptical also because of the materialistic philosophy that advertising constantly injects into society with every ad received.

Undoubtedly, skepticism toward advertising is a desirable attitude because it could increase the quality of life of individuals, giving them the feeling that they can control what happens to them, it can positively influence their lifestyle and, not least, skepticism toward advertising can positively influence the nutrition of adults (Brauneis 2016, 37). Acquiring a robust advertising skepticism is based on two essential premises: first, the existence and constant cultivation of the intellectual faculties to analyze and evaluate, and second, the acquisition of information regarding the intentions and strategies that advertisers use to sell various brands to consumers. Basically, from the moment of understanding the ideas and strategies behind advertising claims, people develop a critical capacity, which they can apply by independently evaluating advertisements.

5. Factors influencing children's skeptical attitude toward advertising

A correct and complete definition of advertising skepticism would help us to correctly identify the factors that determine this type of cognitive attitude. The definition of advertising skepticism adopted by Sabrina Brauneis, as the negative attitude of the consumer toward the motives of the assertions and the assertions made by advertisers, is close to the definitions and meanings with which most researchers work (Boush et al., 1994; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). As we will emphasize at the end of the article, this understanding of skepticism is one-sided and represents a much-weakened concept compared to the idea of skepticism outlined in the space of general epistemology debates. Not understanding a concept, not being familiar with the content of a claim, or not liking a character are real reasons why a child may have a negative attitude toward an advertising claim; in these cases, his negative attitude towards an advertising claim does not mean skepticism. Genuine skepticism requires attention to detail, discernment about the situation in which one is communicating, the ability to make essential correlations, and the ability to compare multiple options and critically evaluate them.

For now, following in the footsteps of Sabrina Brauneis (2016), we will expose the main categories of factors that determine the genesis of the skeptical attitude toward advertising. Knowing these factors is fundamental to being able to determine whether children at certain ages can be skeptical of advertising or not. This researcher identifies five categories of factors that can influence skeptical attitude: demographics (age, gender, education, etc.), personality type, social environment, genetic inheritance, knowledge of persuasion mechanisms, and initiation into advertising strategies.

A. Demographic factors. Age is considered the most influential factor in the genesis of skepticism toward advertising; even though children between the ages of 8 and 12 develop logical thinking and the ability to differentiate their own opinions from those of others, they do not yet fully understand the persuasive attempts of marketers or the perspective of advertisers. These abilities usually emerge after age 12 with the development of what Jean Piaget calls operational-form intelligence. Even now, metacognition is developing, the theory of mind is maturing, and predominantly emotional thinking is being replaced by predominantly rational thinking. (Buck et al., 1995) Another significant demographic factor is gender; statistically, women may express a lower level of skepticism than men (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). The third crucial demographic factor in the genesis of a skeptical attitude towards advertising is education; the higher the level of education, the greater the level of advertising skepticism, because education makes it easier to analyze sales claims and perceive the persuasive intent of advertisers (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001; Brauneis 2016, 41-42).

B. Personal factors. The personality type predisposes a person to skepticism; an extrovert has more self-confidence than an introvert and therefore more easily doubts the opinions of others, including those identified in an advertisement (Boush et al., 1994; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). Self-esteem can influence the emergence of skepticism toward advertisements: a person with high self-esteem will have more confidence in their own opinions and will be more skeptical of advertisers' claims (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998). Finally, ad skepticism will be influenced by a person's capacity to be skeptical in general; if a person is not generally skeptical, it is hard to believe that they will develop heightened skepticism only about advertising (Boush et al., 1994; Brauneis 2016, 42).

C. The social environment. The family, by imposing a certain intellectual atmosphere, is a determining factor in the formation of a

child's emotional and cognitive skills in the first years of life; therefore, the family atmosphere may affect advertising skepticism (Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001). This environment, which can determine the genesis of the ability to be skeptical in general and towards advertising in particular, is completed by play partners, friends, and teachers (Brauneis 2016, 42). In the same vein, Maglenburg and Bristol (1998) believe that the most important factors that influence the genesis of skepticism in children toward advertising are socialization factors: family, peers, and the extent of mass media consumption. Thus, children who live and are brought up in families with a concept-oriented communication style (i.e. towards presenting, discussing, and evaluating ideas, even if they are controversial) are much more likely to become skeptical of advertising compared to children brought up in a family with a socio-oriented communication style (that is, one that tries to avoid conflicts and discourages them from entering into debates) (Maglenburg & Bristol, 1998).

D. Hereditary factors. The most important hereditary factor influencing the genesis and extent of the ability to be skeptical is the level of intelligence. A more intelligent person has superior cognitive abilities that facilitate the analytical processing of the information received from advertising and, in parallel, that facilitate the easier discovery of the persuasive intentions of the advertisers (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998; Brauneis 2016, 42-43).

E. Knowledge of persuasion mechanisms and advertising literacy. The better a person knows the methods and tools of persuasion and the better he knows the strategic intentions and mechanisms of advertising, the more likely he is to be skeptical of advertising. High levels of literacy in advertising practices lead to a high level of ad processing and may lead to a higher level of advertising skepticism (Brauneis 2016, 43). This kind of initiation into persuasion techniques and advertising strategies is rarely to be found among children.

As Sabrina Brauneis also points out, in the case of certain children, the influences of these factors interfere and overlap; strict separation or exact determination of the weight of one factor or another influencing skepticism towards advertising is an almost impossible operation.

6. Types of skepticism expressed by children toward advertising

There is some scientific evidence that children can sometimes be skeptical of advertisements, but not all research have come to a firm

conclusion on this issue (Gunter et al. 2005, 30-47). Certainly, the ability to critically evaluate advertising increases with age; for this reason, scientific discussions on this topic are quite nuanced. One can never speak in terms of the total presence of skepticism towards advertising in children, as is manifested in the case of an educated adult. By the age of six, most children are tempted to view advertising videos as a form of entertainment; only after the age of eight do children come to treat advertising clips as a way of promoting the benefits of some brands (Gunter et al. 2005, 42). After the age of eight, some children can identify sometimes the commercial intent of advertising and sporadically show critical manifestations toward it. Only half of children over the age of nine believe that advertisements do not always tell the truth and that advertisers may not always be honest because they want to make money (Ward, Reale & Levinson, 1972).

Maria T. Chu, Mark Blades, and Jane Herbert (2014) believe that Koslow's (2000) distinction between accuracy-based skepticism (based on the claims made by an ad) and motives-based skepticism (based on discerning advertisers' intentions) provides a useful framework for studying how children evaluate the credibility of advertisements. Skepticism based on the accuracy of claims and skepticism based on advertisers' motives are not mutually exclusive; however, motives-based skepticism, which presupposes the presence of a capacity for nuanced critical evaluation combined with an understanding of the logic behind advertising communication, is specific to adults rather than children. Therefore, children's skepticism is one related to the accuracy and correctness of certain claims identified in received advertisements, rather than a skepticism based on an understanding of persuasive intentions. Skepticism based on the understanding of intentions, specific to adults, manifests itself uniformly, and consistently and applies to all advertisements; on the other hand, accuracy-based skepticism manifests itself only in the case of specific advertisements (Chu, Blades & Hebert 2014, 41).

Maria T. Chu, Mark Blades & Jane Herbert embrace Young's (1990) suggestion that accuracy-based skepticism is a cognitive performance that emerges earlier in an individual's developmental history than motives-based skepticism. Some young children can sometimes show skepticism towards some advertisements because they understand the unrealistic, fictional, or exaggerated character of some scenes or characters in the advertisements. Young's suggestion is consistent with other research (Gunter et al., 2005) showing that, from an early age, many children recognize that characters in TV stories are costumed actors or

that actions and events in a TV show are fictional because they violate the regularities and causal order from the physical world. So, if five-year-olds can evaluate the realism and truth of television programs, they can certainly understand the degree of realism of advertisements based on their evaluation of the truth of the claims the advertisements contain. By the age of nine, there will be enough children who judge some advertisements as unrealistic or exaggerated, as having unacceptable content (Chu, Blades & Hebert 2014, 41).

Another source of accuracy-based skepticism is children's comparisons between claims in an advertisement for a particular product and their own experience with that product (Chu, Blades & Hebert 2014, 42). As consumers, children can directly experience the existence of noticeable differences between the positive claims of advertisements and the poor quality of some products. For example, Oates, Blades, Gunter, and Don (2003) found that, when present, 8- and 10-year-olds' skepticism toward advertising was due to experiencing brands that did not live up to the advertising claims. Thus, children over 8 years of age may be aware of the asymmetry between advertising claims and product quality and may become skeptical as a result.

It is certain that, according to the definition of skepticism adopted by the researchers of this phenomenon, most scientific results have established the existence of skeptical manifestations towards advertising in children. However, there is a striking asymmetry between the presence of accuracy-based and motives-based skepticism: accuracy-based skepticism was quite present among children; on the other hand, skepticism based on understanding the motives of advertisers was very rare. Obviously, in the context of investigating the sources and types of skepticism towards advertising that manifests itself in children, there have been researchers who have wondered whether skepticism towards advertising is just a contextual manifestation of an attitude of general skepticism that manifests itself in the case of certain children. Obermiller and Spangenberg (2000) demonstrated that, by referring to children's ability to evaluate brands and products based on multiple sources of information, skepticism toward advertising represents a specific cognitive attitude. Following the investigation, the researchers found that advertising was considered by children to be the least credible of the five sources of information indicated about brands and products. In other words, children's skepticism toward advertising would represent a distinct cognitive attitude and not the manifestation of a general skeptical

attitude. But, as noted above, this skepticism is overwhelmingly aimed at advertising claims, and less so at the motives of advertisers.

Maria T. Chu, Mark Blades & Jane Herbert (2014) designed and conducted scientific research to highlight the extent to which children can develop motives-based skepticism. These three researchers asked a group of 85 children of different ages three sets of questions to measure understanding of the advertisements viewed, trust and acceptance of advertisement claims, and trust in advertising. In summary, the results reached by the three researchers are as follows: 6-year-old children expressed skepticism about advertisements, almost always because of characteristics of the advertisement or personal disappointment caused by the product (i.e., accuracy-based skepticism); eight-year-olds only sometimes expressed motives-based skepticism, most often expressing accuracy-based skepticism; more than half of the ten-year-olds expressed motives-based skepticism. Thus, a significant number of children between the ages of 8 and 10 expressed a critical attitude toward advertisements based on understanding the motives. However, it should be emphasized that, in most cases, when some children showed motives-based skepticism, it was toward specific ads, and this critical attitude did not automatically transfer to other ads evaluated. So, despite being aware of the persuasive intent, most of the children were skeptical because they assessed the accuracy of the ads' claims. In other words, children's knowledge of persuasive intentions cannot guarantee that they also possess a deep understanding of advertisers' intentions and strategies. Sensing the persuasive intentions of the advertisers did not cause children to develop general skepticism towards advertising, the type of skepticism found in adults. The three researchers conclude that even if older children realize the persuasive intent of advertisements, they still remain vulnerable to advertising persuasive strategies for some time (Chu, Blades & Hebert 2014, 43-46).

The question arises whether the education acquired within the family or in schools can accelerate the emergence of skepticism towards advertising in children. This is possible, but not every piece of information about advertising persuasion automatically leads to skepticism. Research by Rozendaal et. al. (2016) highlighted the fact that only warnings about the manipulative intentions of advertisements, i.e. only warnings about the deceptive nature of advertisements, can increase children's degree of skepticism about advertising and, implicitly, decrease children's desires toward the advertised brands. On the other hand, simply warning children about the commercial intentions behind the ads (i.e.,

warnings about the advertisers' intent to increase sales) did not increase children's skepticism about advertising (Rozendaal et al., 2016, 7-8). Therefore, even if children's skepticism towards advertising is more difficult to develop naturally, education, from an early age, focused on explaining the potentially manipulative intentions behind advertising communication can generally make children more attentive and effective in critically analyzing advertisements.

7. Epistemological limits of research on children's skepticism toward advertising

The commercials used in research on children's skepticism about advertising have always been video commercials, made for television and broadcast on TV screens. There are no significant studies conducted on children's behavior regarding advertisements viewed on tablets, mobile phones, or laptop screens. Such studies are lacking also because they are more difficult to carry out, but also for reasons of an ethical nature. However, the lack of these studies deprives us of the possibility of having a complete picture of the real impact of advertising on children and their ability to resist brand promises. It must be stated that, in the online environment, the persuasive strategies of advertisers are added to the tools of technological persuasion incorporated in the construction of any website or the design of any digital platform. The role of these technological persuasion tools is to generate as much browsing time as possible from users. However, many adults, who have a robust capacity for critical judgment, become addicted to these devices, spending five or six hours a day engrossed online. Under these conditions, it is unrealistic and cynical to argue in favor of children's skepticism in receiving advertising, given that tens of millions of children are abandoned daily by their parents in front of a mobile phone or a tablet as an electronic babysitter.

The concept of skepticism used by researchers is a very weak one. Simply noting the lack of concordance between an advertising claim and a consumer experience does not signify the existence of skepticism. Likewise, mere inadvertent awareness of advertisers' persuasive intentions does not necessarily correlate with skepticism; moreover, the rejection of a product or the negative evaluation of a character in an advertisement does not equate to the existence of a critical spirit or a skeptical attitude. Furthermore, there is an asymmetry between the conditions an adult must meet to be skeptical about advertising and the conditions a child should meet. If adults are considered skeptical because

they understand the different intentions and interests of advertisers and consumers, children are declared skeptical of advertising if they do not approve of the ad if they form a negative opinion of the characters in the ad, or if they do not approve of the product. A weakened concept of skepticism results in the identification of a much larger number of skeptical children. A weakened concept of skepticism results in the lowering of the age at which children are declared skeptical and, consequently, fit to be exposed to advertising. Such scientific results, even if they spring from the honest intentions of scientific research, seem to serve the interests of companies that want to make young children legitimate targets of advertising on all channels.

A true skepticism towards advertising should include: a clear understanding that a video ad is a paid message and that the characters are saying what they are saying because they are being paid to deliver a message designed specifically to sell a product or service; a clear understanding of the producer's intentions and the intentions of those who produced the viewed advertisement; the ability to realistically assess the distance between the promises and intentions of advertisers and the quality of the product; understanding the advantages and disadvantages that would arise from purchasing the product; awareness of alternatives existing on the market to products and services able to satisfy a certain desire or need; the ability to understand the truth conditions and, implicitly, the conditions that falsify claims from advertisements; ability to analyze the basis and evidence for claims in advertisements. If we accept this strengthened concept of epistemologically justified skepticism, we will understand that most children up to the age of 12 are not skeptical of advertising. Moreover, we will understand that some adults are also far from genuine skepticism about advertising.

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