

# [The ethics of food advertising targeted toward children: parental viewpoint](https://assignbuster.com/the-ethics-of-food-advertising-targeted-toward-children-parental-viewpoint/)

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O Springer 2009 Journal of Business Ethics (2010) 91: 299–311 DOI 10. 1007/s10551-009-0084-2 The Ethics ofFoodAdvertising Targeted Toward Children: Parental Viewpoint ABSTRACT. The children’s market has become significantly more important to marketers in recent years. They have been spending increasing amounts on advertising, particularly of food and beverages, to reach this segment. At the same time, there is a critical debate among parents, government agencies, and industry experts as to the ethics of food advertising practices aimed toward children. The present study examines parents’ ethical views of food advertising targeting children.

Findings indicate that parents’ beliefs concerning at least some dimensions of moral intensity are significantly related to their ethical judgments and behavioral intentions of food advertising targeting children as well as the perceived moral intensity of the situation. KEY WORDS: parents, children, ethics, food advertising The children’s market has become signi? cantly important to marketers (McNeal, 1998). Many marketers spend millions of dollars on advertising to reach this growing segment (Jardine and Wentz, 2005). More speci? cally, food and beverage companies in the USA spend an estimated US $10–12 billion targeting hildren and adolescents (McKay, 2005). According to the KaiserFamilyFoundation, children are exposed to more than 7, 600 commercials on candy, cereal, andfast foodin any given year (Kotz, 2007). The effects of advertising on children have been highly debated among various groups, including parents, researchers, industry experts, and government agencies. One of the primary debates has been the potential impact of food advertising directed at children. A variety of institutions are involved in this debate. Some of these organizations such as public advocacy groups criticize the food companies and elevision networks concerning the increased amounts spent as well as the types of promotional efforts targeted Aysen Bakir Scott J. Vitell at children (York, 2007). Furthermore, statistics provide substantial concern aboutobesity, showing that approximately 50% of elementary-school children and 80% of teenagers will battle obesity during their lifetime. There is also debate among practitioners on advertising practices directed at children, with even marketing professionals indicating concern about advertising targeted at children. When interviewed, 35% of them consider the general ethical and moral tandards in the industry to be ‘‘ lower than in the past,’’ with 40% believing that these standards are about the same (Grimm, 2004). Thus, only 25% believe the standards are improved. Some companies have already started taking actions to deal with criticisms and even with government warning. In Europe, soft-drink companies have developed self-regulatory measures to stop advertising junk food and to help tackle child obesity. To avoid stricter laws, soft-drink companies have pledged to stop marketing towards children under 12 years old. The companies also have pledged to limit soft-drink sales at schools (Wentz, 005). Other countries in Europe, however, have been taking an even stricter stance on regulations; for example, starting in 2005, Ireland introduced a ban on celebrities who appear in food and beverages targeted at children (Jardine and Wentz, 2004). Furthermore, some companies have also responded to government calls by promoting active lifestyles when targeting children in food ads. McDonald’s, in the UK, ran a campaign that featured Ronald McDonald and used animated fruit and vegetable characters which were called Yums. These characters urged children to eat right and stay active (Jardine and Wentz, 2004).

Given all these statistics showing the potential impact of food advertising targeting children, parents 300 Aysen Bakir and Scott J. Vitell are concerned over whether or not marketers have been conducting ethical practices in promoting their products. However, this issue has not received signi? cant attention in the marketing literature. This paper attempts to ? ll this apparent gap by examining parents’ ethical views of food advertising targeted at children. In doing so, it also examines the potential impact of parents’ attitudes toward food advertising and toward the use of nutrition information on their thical judgments and behavioral intentions. Marketing ethics and advertising to children Advertising to children has long been one of the most controversial areas of marketing. The debate ranges from whether or not it is even ethical to advertise to children and includes the types of advertising practices that might be considered ethical. At the center of this debate is food advertising targeted at children. The impact of advertising to children has been shown in previous studies (Goldberg and Gorn, 1974; Gorn and Goldberg, 1977). Findings include the fact that low-income children exposed to a commercial just nce had favorable attitudes towards the advertised product (Gorn and Goldberg, 1977). Furthermore, these authors found that exposure to television ads among 5- and 6-year-old children directly in? uenced breakfast food and snack preferences (Goldberg et al. , 1978). Finally, exposure to advertisements has also been shown to in? uence the frequency of snacking among children (Bolton, 1983). Advertising has been criticized for promoting materialism, persuading individuals to buy things they do not need, and providing false or misleading information (Pollay and Mittal, 1993). Parents’ concerns toward the impact of advertising directed at hildren have risen signi? cantly in the last decade (Hudson et al. , 2008). These concerns have also been expressed by academicians (Moore, 2004). However, only a limited number of studies have examined ethical issues aimed at the children’s segment (Ahuja et al. , 2001; Hudson et al. , 2008). Despite these increased concerns and the ensuing debate, parents’ ethical views of food advertising targeting children have not been examined in the marketing literature. Ethical judgments and behavioral intentions Understanding how parents view and make decisions about ethical issues targeted at children is important to marketers.

Several factors might in? uence ethical decision-making, including situational factors (Hunt and Vitell, 1986) and individual differences (Hunt and Vitellm, 1986; Jones, 1991). Ethical (or unethical) behavior is in? uenced directly by the ethical judgments and behavioral intentions of the individuals. An individual’s ethical judgment is de? ned as ‘‘ the degree to which he or she considers a particular behavior morally acceptable’’ (Bass et al. , 1999, p. 189). Ethical judgments have been considered a central construct in several ethical decisionmaking models (Dubinsky and Loken, 1989; Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Jones, 1991).

These decision-making theories provide an understanding of how an individual’s behavioral intentions and ethical judgments are relevant to making decisions in situations involving ethical issues; for example, the theory of reasoned action suggests that individuals act in a manner consistent with their attitudes. On the other hand, other factors might cause individuals to develop behavioral intentions that might be inconsistent with their attitudes (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). Past research has also shown that individuals are more likely to state their behavioral intentions if they perceive the situation as ethical (Bass et al. , 1999).

Furthermore, Hunt and Vitell (1986, p. 9) de? ned behavioral intentions as ‘‘ the likelihood that any particular alternative will be chosen. ’’ The authors also suggest that ethical judgments would impact the individual behavior through behavioral intentions. Overall, ethical judgments and behavioral intentions are important constructs to gain insights regarding advertising directed at children. Attitude toward food advertising As noted, research examining parents’ attitudes toward advertising, particularly to food advertising, directed at children is limited. Past studies examined the relationship between familycommunicationatterns and parental reactions toward advertising (Rose et al. , 1998), and parental involvement The Ethics of Food Advertising Targeted Toward Children and authoritative parenting and attitude toward advertising (Carlson and Grossbart, 1988). Only one study examined the relationship between attitude toward food advertising and parental styles (Crosby and Grossbart, 1984). The authors found differences regarding attitudes toward food advertising based upon parental styles, with more authoritative parents being more concerned about children’s food advertising as compared with more permissive parents.

Governments andhealthadvocates in different countries are trying to introduce stricter regulations on food advertising targeting children since they blame marketers for increased levels ofchildhood obesity. In France, food marketers are faced with choosing between paying a 1. 5% tax on their ad budgets to fund healthy-eating messages or else adding a health message to commercials. In Canada, one-third of children between 2 and 11 years old are overweight and some marketers are promoting healthy lifestyles for children. Given the different proportions of childhood obesity problems from ne county to the next, multinational food marketers such as McDonald’s now have differing strategies in each country based on how they must undertake this global challenge (Jardine and Wentz, 2005). Clearly, advertisers have been questioned about their ethical standards. Although there is increased discussion among parents regarding the potential impact of advertising and concern about how ethical (or unethical) advertising practices are towards children, this issue has not been adequately researched. Since the relationship between parents’ attitude toward food advertising and ethical judgments and behavioral intentions f the advertising tactics targeted at children has not been examined in the marketing literature, this study focuses on those parental perspectives. Therefore, based upon the previous discussion, it is hypothesized that: Parents’ attitude toward food advertising will be positively related to their ethical judgments of the food advertising targeted at children. H2: Parents’ attitude toward food advertising will be positively related to their behavioral intentions of the food advertising targeted at children. H1: 301 Attitude toward use of nutrition information Concerns about children’s nutrition include multiple actors. Some of these concerns are centered on nutrition de? ciencies in children’s diets due to economic factors, poor eating habits, and inadequate nutritional knowledge of parents. The government has taken several steps to deal with children’s nutrition problems by being involved in school lunch programs, regulation of children’s advertising, and nutritioneducationin schools (Crosby et al. , 1982). Research has also shown the positive impact of parental in? uence and nutrition education (Grossbart et al. , 1982). Parents’ attitudes toward the use of nutrition vary from one parent to the other.

Furthermore, parents, particularly mothers, wield a signi? cant impact on children’sconsumptionof a balanced diet and exposure to a variety of foods. Previous research has shown that mothers who endorsed nutrition information had more positive attitudes toward nutrition and expressed more concerns about food advertising targeted at children (Crosby et al. , 1982). Therefore, it is further hypothesized that: Parents’ attitude toward the use of nutrition information will be positively related to their ethical judgments of the food advertising targeted at children. H4: Parents’ attitude toward the use of nutrition nformation will be positively related to their behavioral intentions of the food advertising targeted at children. H3: Moral intensity Jones (1991) de? nes moral intensity as ‘‘ the extent of issue-related moral imperative in a situation’’ (p. 372). Furthermore, he suggests that ethics-related contexts vary with their level of moral intensity. Jones (1991) identi? ed six categories (magnitude of consequences, probability of effect, temporal immediacy, concentration of effect, proximity, and social consensus) of the moral intensity construct. The ? rst four items refer to the various dimensions of harm the action might cause.

More speci? cally, magnitude of consequences refers to the cumulative 302 Aysen Bakir and Scott J. Vitell harm (or lack thereof) the action might cause. Probability of effect refers to the likelihood that the action will cause harm (or lack thereof). Temporal immediacy refers to ‘‘ the length of time between the present and the onset of consequences of the moral act in question (shorter length of time implies greater immediacy)’’ (Jones, 1991, p. 376). The concentration of effect refers to the number of people who would believe that the action would cause harm (or lack thereof). Proximity is the ‘‘ feeling of nearness social, cultural, psychological, or physical)’’ (Jones, 1991, p. 376) that the individual has for those affected by the action in question. Finally, social consensus is the extent of the feeling that action taken is good (or not). Moral intensity is a multidimensional construct that measures the moral intensity of the situation. Ethical decision-making process must be in? uenced by the perception that the potential action has a moral or ethical facet that needs to be evaluated (Barnett, 2001). For marketing practitioners, studies have shown that perceived moral intensity affects the perception of ethical problems in various situations Singhapakdi et al. , 1996a; Singhapakdi et al. , 1999). Furthermore, past studies also have shown that moral intensity in? uences behavioral intentions of the individuals in ethics-related situations (Robin et al. , 1996; Singhapakdi et al. , 1996a). Also, Hunt and Vitell (1986) suggest a theoretical link between intentions and ethical judgments. Therefore, moral intensity would also be expected to in? uence ethical judgments. The relationship between moral intensity and ethical judgments and behavioral intentions has also been empirically shown (Barnett, 2001; Vitell et al. , 2003). Thus, it is hypothesized that:

Parents’ attitude toward moral intensity will be positively related to their ethical judgments of the food advertising targeted at children. H6: Parents’ attitude toward moral intensity will be positively related to their behavioral intentions of the food advertising targeted at children. H5: contexts (e. g. , Singhapakdi et al. , 1996c; Singhapakdi et al. , 1999). Forsyth (1980) suggests that idealism and relativism can be considered as individual differences that might impact individuals’ judgments of moral issues. Idealism measures an individual’s acceptance of universal moral absolutes. This construct focuses on the assumption that, if ight actions are taken, this will lead to desired outcomes. On the other hand, relativism measures individual’s rejection of universal moral tenets (Forsyth, 1980). Therefore, the conceptualization of these constructs might suggest that individuals who are more idealistic would be more likely to have higher ethical judgments and behavioral intentions. Previous research provides some support for these relationships (Singhapakdi et al. , 1996c). Relativism is de? ned as a belief that moral standards are relative to one’scultureor society. Forsyth (1992) also indicates that relativistic individuals might ormulate their decisions based on skepticism and evaluate situations based on other than ethical principles. Furthermore, relativistic individuals evaluate what is right or wrong based on the speci? cs of the situation (Park, 2005). Forsyth (1992) also indicates that idealism and relativism are not contrary concepts, but rather independent of each other; for example, an individual might have high scores both on idealism and relativism, which indicates that the person might simultaneously accept absolute moral rules and yet also evaluate the alternatives available based upon the speci? c situation and its possible onsequences. Therefore, parents would evaluate each of the advertising tactics directed at their children on a situation-by-situation basis. Since food advertising directed at children has received signi? cant attention recently due to the health concerns of children and increased obesity rates (York, 2007), speci? c types of advertising tactics such as potentially developing unhealthy eating habits might be received more negatively due to their apparent impact on children. Therefore, it is hypothesized that: Parents’ idealism will be related to their ethical judgments of the food advertising targeted at hildren. H8: Parents’ idealism will be related to their behavioral intentions of the food advertising targeted at children. H7: Idealism and relativism Idealism and relativism have been used to measure moral philosophies in various marketing-related The Ethics of Food Advertising Targeted Toward Children Parents’ relativism will ethical judgments of the geted at children. H10: Parents’ relativism will behavioral intentions of targeted at children. H9: be related to their food advertising tarbe related to their the food advertising Method Sample The survey was sent to parents at several schools ocated in the Midwest. The researchers contacted the schools and got permission to send the survey to parents at the schools that agreed to participate in the study. The number of schools that participated in the study provided signi? cant diversity in terms of economic background. The majority of the sample included educated and employed middle-income families. Of the 1, 020 surveys sent, 189 surveys were completed, for a response rate of 18. 52%. Of the 189 surveys, 28 surveys had missing data for individual questions. Among the respondents, 78% were mothers and the rest of were fathers. Table I isplays the complete demographics of the respondents. Procedure Once the school principals gave permission, the researchers contacted the teachers from kindergarten to eighth grade. The teachers in each grade sent the questionnaires home to parents with the children. Once the parents ? lled out the questionnaires, the children returned the completed questionnaire to the schools. Measures and reliability The dependent variables were behavioral intentions and ethical judgments. The independent variables were moral intensity, idealism, relativism, attitude toward food advertising aimed at children, and ttitude toward the parents’ use of nutrition information. 303 TABLE I Demographics of the respondents Variable Parent Mother Father Age of the parent 29 years old or under 30–39 years old 40–49 years old 50–59 years old Education level of the parent High-school degree Some college degree College graduate Some graduate studyGraduate degreeHousehold income (US $) 100k Work status of the parent Working full time Working part time Not working No. of children One child Two children Three children Four children More than four children % 78. 1 21. 9 4. 8 48. 9 39. 8 6. 5 5. 4 19. 4 38. 7 5. 4 31. 2 12. 2 14. 5 26. 6 3. 9 22. 8 67. 9 17. 1 15 18. 7 42. 2 27. 3 7. 5 4. 3 Moral intensity This scale measures parents’ attitude toward moral intensity in a given situation. This construct was developed by Jones (1991) and includes six dimensions. However, the scale used to measure the construct was developed by Singhapakdi et al. (1996b). Responses were measured by a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The harm dimension included three variables: magnitude of consequences, temporal immediacy, and concentration of effect. The other two items were proximity and social consensus.

The reliability of the harm scale was 0. 85 for the 304 Aysen Bakir and Scott J. Vitell ? rst scenario, 0. 91 for the second scenario, and 0. 86 for the third scenario. Idealism and relativism This scale measures the extent of individual’s acceptance of moral absolutes, whereas the relativism scale measures the extent of individual’s rejection of universal moral principles. The two scales were developed by Forsyth (1980). The ten items for each scale were measured utilizing a seven-point Likerttype scales, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The reliability of the scale was 0. 83 or idealism and 0. 84 for relativism. Attitude toward food advertising This scale measures parents’ attitudes toward food advertising directed at children. The scale is adapted from a Carlson and Grossbart (1988) study and includes six items. The parents’ extent of agreement was measured by a ? ve-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability of the scale was 0. 80. Attitude toward use of nutritional information This scale measures parents’ use of nutritional information. The scale was originally developed by Moorman (1998) and includes four items.

The parents’ extent of agreement toward the use of nutritional information were measured by a ? ve-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The reliability of the scale was 0. 82. Scenarios This study utilized three scenarios to measure parents’ behavioral intentions and ethical judgments relative to speci? c situations. Ethical judgments and behavioral intentions were then measured by using a seven-point Likert scale asking the respondents the extent they agree/disagree with the questions. For measuring ethical judgments, the following statement was used, ‘‘ I consider the action taken to e very ethical,’’ whereas for measuring behavioral intentions, the following statement was used, ‘‘ I would be likely to take the same action in this situation. ’’ Therefore, a greater degree of agreement with the action taken indicates that the respondents had higher ethical levels of behavioral intentions and ethical judgments. At the end of each scenario, the action taken by an advertiser was presented. The scenarios focused on addressing some of the current advertising practices used to target children. The ? rst scenario addresses the use of ‘‘ advergames’’ targeting children. Children are playing these games n the Internet in a branded context. The games provide product-related information and even ask children to contact their friends. The second scenario focused on some of the highly debated advertising practices at schools. A food company sponsors programs at schools and child care centers. During visits, the company provides entertainment with well-known characters and exposes children to samples of their potentially unhealthy food products. The third scenario centers on a candy and cereal company who is considering selling books that spotlight the client’s brand. Children can play and learn counting by using sugar-? led sweets and cereals. The books use the company’s brand as an example in their plays and counting. The scenarios were pretested. The results indicated that most respondents believed that the actions taken by the advertisers in all of the scenarios were unethical. The majority of the respondents also indicated that they disagreed with the actions taken in the three scenarios. Data analysis and results The hypotheses were tested separately for each of the three scenarios. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the hypotheses. H1 measured whether parents’ attitude toward food advertising is ositively related to their ethical judgments of the food advertising targeted at children. The three scenarios tested did not indicate signi? cant differences. The ANOVA results were: scenario 1: F(7, 152) = 26. 836, p < 0. 926; scenario 2: F(7, 158) = 11. 334, p < 0. 933; and scenario 3: F(7, 160) = 21. 468, p < 0. 724. Thus, parents’ attitude toward food advertising was not related to their ethical judgments of the food advertising targeted at children. H2 measured whether parents’ attitude toward food advertising is positively related to their behavioral intentions of the food advertising targeted at children.

Again, none of the three scenarios resulted in signi? cant differences. The Ethics of Food Advertising Targeted Toward Children 305 TABLE II ANOVA analysis: scenarios 1, 2, and 3, dependent variable: ethical judgments Variable Moral intensity: Moral intensity: Moral intensity: Idealism Relativism Attitude toward Attitude toward Scenario 1 p Value harm consensus proximity food advertising use of nutrition Scenario 2 p Value Scenario 3 p Value 0. 000 0. 095 0. 288 0. 206 0. 200 0. 926 0. 093 F(7, 152) = 26. 835 0. 000 0. 037 0. 772 0. 166 0. 006 0. 933 0. 822 F(7, 158) = 11. 334 0. 000 0. 000 0. 255 0. 633 0. 60 0. 724 0. 127 F(7, 160) = 21. 468 TABLE III ANOVA analysis: scenarios 1, 2, and 3, dependent variable: behavioral intentions Variable Moral intensity: Moral intensity: Moral intensity: Idealism Relativism Attitude toward Attitude toward Scenario 1 p Value harm consensus proximity food advertising use of nutrition Scenario 2 p Value Scenario 3 p Value 0. 000 0. 000 0. 091 0. 732 0. 162 0. 854 0. 223 F(7, 153) = 18. 707 0. 000 0. 002 0. 539 0. 186 0. 036 0. 643 0. 116 F(7, 157) = 17. 721 0. 000 0. 005 0. 809 0. 567 0. 081 0. 554 0. 004 F(7, 160) = 16. 315 The ANOVA results were: scenario 1: F(7, 153) = 8. 707, p < 0. 854; scenario 2: F(7, 157) = 17. 721, p < 0. 643; and scenario 3: F(7, 160) = 16. 315, p < 0. 554. Thus parents’ attitude toward food advertising was not related to their behavioral intentions relative to the food advertising targeted at children. Tables II and III display these ? ndings. H3 measured whether parents’ attitude toward the use of nutrition information is positively related to their ethical judgments of the food advertising targeted at children. The three scenarios tested did not indicate signi? cant differences. The ANOVA results were: scenario 1: F(7, 152) = 26. 35, p < 0. 093; scenario 2: F(7, 158) = 11. 334, p < 0. 822; and scenario 3: F(7, 160) = 21. 468, p < 0. 127. H4 measured whether parents’ attitude toward the use of nutrition information is positively related to their behavioral intentions relative to the food advertising targeted at children. There were no signi? cant differences regarding the ? rst two scenarios, but there were signi? cant differences on the third scenario among parents’ attitude toward the use of nutrition information and its relation to their behavioral intentions of the food advertising targeted at children. The ANOVA esults were: scenario 1: F(7, 153) = 18. 707, p < 0. 223; scenario 2: F(7, 157) = 17. 721, p < 0. 116; and scenario 3: F(7, 160) = 16. 315, p < 0. 004. H5 measured whether parents’ attitude concerning moral intensity is positively related to their ethical judgments of the food advertising targeted at children. Moral intensity was measured by three separate dimensions: harm, social consensus, and proximity. There were signi? cant differences on the harm construct among three scenarios. The ANOVA results were: scenario 1: F(7, 152) = 26. 836, p < 0. 000; scenario 2: F(7, 158) = 11. 334, p < 0. 000; 306

Aysen Bakir and Scott J. Vitell and scenario 3: F(7, 160) = 21. 468, p < 0. 000. Furthermore, there were signi? cant differences on the social consensus construct for the second and third scenarios. The ANOVA results were: scenario 1: F(7, 152) = 26. 836, p < 0. 095; scenario 2: F(7, 158) = 11. 334, p < 0. 037; and scenario 3: F(7, 160) = 21. 468, p < 0. 000. Finally, there were no signi? cant differences on proximity among three scenarios. The ANOVA results were: scenario 1: F(7, 152) = 26. 836, p < 0. 288; scenario 2: F(7, 158) = 11. 334, p < 0. 772; and scenario 3: F(7, 160) = 21. 468, p < 0. 55. Thus, overall H5 was at least partially supported. H6 measured whether parents’ attitude concerning moral intensity is positively related to their behavioral intentions relative to the food advertising targeted at children. Parents’ attitude toward the harm and social consensus dimensions indicated signi? cant differences among three scenarios. The ANOVA results for harm were: scenario 1: F(7, 153) = 18. 707, p < 0. 000; scenario 2: F(7, 157) = 17. 721, p < 0. 000; and scenario 3: F(7, 160) = 16. 315, p < 0. 000. The ANOVA results for social consensus were: scenario 1: F(7, 153) = 18. 707, p < 0. 00; scenario 2: F(7, 157) = 17. 721, p < 0. 002; and scenario 3: F(7, 160) = 16. 315, p < 0. 005. On the other hand, parents’ attitude toward proximity did not indicate any signi? cant differences among three scenarios. The ANOVA results for proximity were: scenario 1: F(7, 153) = 18. 707, p < 0. 091; scenario 2: F(7, 157) = 17. 721, p < 0. 539; and scenario 3: F(7, 160) = 16. 315, p < 0. 809. H7 measured whether parents’ idealistic moralphilosophyis related to their ethical judgments of the food advertising targeted at children. Parents’ idealism was not signi? cantly related to their ethical udgments. The ANOVA results for idealism were: scenario 1: F(7, 152) = 26. 835, p < 0. 206; scenario 2: F(7, 158) = 11. 334, p < 0. 166; and scenario 3: F(7, 160) = 21. 468, p < 0. 633. H8 measured whether parents’ idealistic moral philosophy is related to their behavioral intentions of the food advertising targeted at children. Again the results were not signi? cant. The ANOVA results for idealism were: scenario 1: F(7, 153) = 18. 707, p < 0. 732; scenario 2: F(7, 157) = 17. 721, p < 0. 186; and scenario 3: F(7, 160) = 16. 315, p < 0. 567. H9 measured whether parents’ relativistic moral hilosophy is related to their ethical judgments of the food advertising targeted at children. H10 mea- sured whether parents’ relativistic moral philosophy is related to their behavioral intentions of the food advertising targeted at children. H9 and H10 were partially supported. Parents’ relativism was signi? cantly related to ethical judgments and intentions for the second scenario. The ANOVA results for idealism were: scenario 1: F(7, 152) = 26. 835, p < 0. 200; scenario 2: F(7, 158) = 11. 334, p < 0. 006; and scenario 3: F(7, 160) = 21. 468, p < 0. 060. There were no signi? ant differences among parents’ relativism regarding the behavioral intentions for the ? rst and the third scenarios. The ANOVA results for relativism were: scenario 1: F(7, 153) = 18. 707, p < 0. 7162; scenario 2: F(7, 157) = 17. 721, p < 0. 036; and scenario 3: F(7, 160) = 16. 315, p < 0. 081. Discussion This paper examined parents’ views of the ethics of food advertising targeted at children. The marketing literature, surprisingly, has not examined this topic. This study attempts to ? ll this gap by examining how parents view various types of food advertising directed at children. Children as consumers have ecome signi? cantly more important to marketers in the last decade. Marketers have heavily promoted their products to this segment and spent millions of dollars on advertising to reach this segment (Jardine and Wentz, 2005). Food advertising represents a signi? cant portion of all advertising spending for marketers while food advertising targeted at children has received signi? cant criticism from both parents and public policy-makers. The ? ndings of the study provide interesting insights. Parents were asked to respond to three different scenarios outlining various food advertising strategies directed at children.

Furthermore, parents’ ethical judgments and behavioral intentions were measured for the three scenarios. One of the independent variables was parents’ attitude toward food advertising. The ? ndings indicated that parents’ attitude toward food advertising did not affect their ethical judgments and behavioral intentions concerning speci? c food advertising directed at their children. One of the reasons for not ? nding a signi? cant relationship might be due to the measurement of other food advertising practices targeted at children in the scenarios that was not included in the The Ethics of Food Advertising Targeted Toward Children cale measuring attitudes toward food advertising. This ? nding provides important implications for marketers which might indicate that parents evaluate speci? c food advertising targeted at children independently of their potential views on general food advertising directed at children. Thus, marketers who are cognizant of the potential harm of advertising to children might still be highly regarded by consumers even if the consumer, in general, has negative or skeptical views of advertising to children. Parents’ attitude toward the use of nutrition information displayed interesting ? ndings.

The third scenario, in particular, focused on speci? c implications of a food product that might have unhealthy eating implications for children. Parents’ attitude toward the use of nutritional information for this scenario was related to their behavioral intentions. On the other hand, there were no signi? cant relationships between an attitude toward the use of nutrition and ethical judgments of food advertising targeted at children for any of the scenarios, including scenario 3. Parents might have not perceived using well-known characters to distribute food company products at schools and child care acilities to have any potential harm. The lack of a relationship between an attitude toward the use of nutritional information and ethical judgments of food advertising targeted at children should be considered on a scenario-by-scenario basis; for example, for the ? rst scenario, it might be that parents did not really think the advergames and the use of well-known characters to distribute food company products at schools and child care facilities presented any potential unethical practices. Particularly, advergames are new promotional tools used on the Web to attract adults and children within a branded context.

Advergames are somewhere between advertising and computer games and include product-related information from the companies with the use of games or part of a game (Nelson, 2002; Mallinckrodt and Mizerski, 2007). Past studies also suggest that advergames might be more persuasive for young children than traditional advertising (Oanh Ha, 2004). Parental awareness of advergames targeting children needs further investigation in future research. Future research should also examine how parents use nutritional information in their food purchase decisions to have a better understanding of the relationship between attitude 307 oward use of nutrition information and ethical perspectives regarding food advertising. Moral intensity signi? cantly affected parents’ ethical judgments and behavioral intentions. This ? nding offers signi? cant implications for marketers and public policy-makers. Parents indicated concerns regarding the potential harm of various food advertising targeting children in the three scenarios. It is important that marketers should be more careful when they create their advertising tactics targeting children. It might also be that more regulations might be needed to address parental concerns regarding the potential effects of food dvertising. The moral intensity measure of proximity was not signi? cantly related to the ethical judgments and behavioral intentions of parents. Proximity measures the ‘‘ feeling of nearness (social, cultural, psychological, or physical)’’ (Jones, 1991, p. 376) that the individual has for those affected by the action in question. It might be that parents considered the action taken unethical whether the results affected their friends/relatives or not. The ? ndings relative to social consensus and its effect on their ethical judgments and behavioral intentions were signi? cant, in most instances.

Thus, parents did consider what others might think about a speci? c situation when forming their ethical judgments and intentions. The ethical perspectives of idealism and relativism also provide some insights regarding parents’ ethical judgments and behavioral intentions. Findings indicated that there is no signi? cant relationship between parents’ attitude toward idealism and their ethical judgments and behavioral intentions. Parents, in this study, may not have perceived the scenarios as situations that should carry universal moral absolutes. On the other hand, parents’ attitude toward relativism signi? antly affected their ethical judgments and behavioral intentions but only for the second scenario. Relativism might be more likely to in? uence opinions on a situation-by-situation basis. The second scenario in particular expressed potential unhealthy effects on children. Therefore, parents might have perceived this scenario as involving questionable ethical practices. Our study has some limitations. Although parents were instructed to ? ll out the questionnaire individually or as a couple, we could not verify whether or not they communicated with each other. This raises the 308 Aysen Bakir and Scott J.

Vitell possibility of a potential demand artifact. Secondly, although survey methods provide important information on individuals’ perceptions and beliefs, qualitative methods would bestow more detailed information on parents’ perceptions and attitudes. Future research should focus on more qualitative techniques to have a deeper understanding of perceptions and attitudes. Third, our ? ndings provide insights only from parents in the Midwestern USA. These ? ndings are not yet generalizable to other cultures or subcultures. Understanding parents’ perspectives on advertising directed at children is important.

Future research should focus on a more detailed parental perspective to uncover how parents make judgments on whether advertising directed at children is ethical or not. Qualitative studies might provide more in-depth understanding. Uncovering these issues might minimize the discrepancy between parents and marketers. The debate on the effects of food advertising targeted at children has intensi? ed in the last several years among academicians, public policy-makers, and marketers. Companies need to respond better to the food-related debates in society, particularly to those related to healthy eating and ethical food marketing.

In conclusion, our ? ndings assist both research and theory in the children’s advertising ? eld. With the increasing prominence of ethics in business/ marketing research, this study presents important ? ndings that advance our understanding of the potential antecedents to the ethical decision-making process for parents in situations involving advertising directed toward their children. We trust that the results generated by this research can be successfully used to guide future ethics research projects in this growing ? eld. Appendix A: scenarios Scenario 1 A food company whose products are, in part, argeted at children is planning to use ‘‘ adver- games’’ (online games in which a company’s product or brand characters are featured). It is also considering encouraging children to contact their friends about a speci? c product or brand as part of their new advertising campaign. The company is considering using the internet, rather than more traditional media such as television, due to the highly debated relationship between aggressive food advertising and increased obesity among children. Action: The company decided to use Internet advertising for their new campaign. Scenario 2

An advertising agency recommended that their client sponsor programs at schools and visit child care centers. These sponsored programs would make a ? nancial contribution to each school and child care center. During these visits the company would provide entertainment with the company’s wellknown characters and provide a sample of the company’s food products to children. If they do this, children who are less than 5 years old would be introduced to a range of products that might be considered ‘‘ unhealthy. ’’ Action: The sponsor decided to conduct these visits to the child care centers/schools and provide a sample of their products.

Scenario 3 A candy and cereal company is considering selling books that spotlight the client’s brand. These children’s books provide content on ‘‘ counting and playing. ’’ Children can play checkers with various fruit-? avored candies and can learn to count using various forms of calorie and sugar-? lled sweets and cereals. The books use the company’s brand as an example for the ‘‘ counting and playing’’ content. Action: The candy and cereal company decided to sell these books to children. The Ethics of Food Advertising Targeted Toward Children Appendix B: scale items 309 APPENDIX B continued Moral intensity 4.

The overall harm (if any) done as a result of the action would be very small Harm 2 The action will harm very few people, if any Harm 3 The action will not cause any harm in the immediate future Proximity If one were a personal friend of the person(s) harmed, the action would be wrong Social Most people would agree that the action is consensus wrong 5. Harm 1 6. 7. 8. Idealism 9. 1. A person should make certain that their actions never intentionally harm another even to a small degree 2. Risks to another should never be tolerated, irrespective of how small the risks might be 3. The existence of potential harm to others is always rong, irrespective of the bene? ts gained 4. One should never psychologically or physically harm another person 5. One should not perform an action which might in anyway threaten the dignity and welfare of another individual 6. If an action could harm an innocent other, then it should not be done 7. Deciding whether or not to perform an act by balancing the positive consequences of the act against the negative consequences of the act is immoral 8. The dignity and welfare of people should be the most important concern of any society 9. It is never necessary to sacri? ce the welfare of others 10.

Moral actions are those which closely match ideals of the most ‘‘ perfect’’ action 10. Attitude toward food advertising 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 2. 3. There are no ethical principles that are so important that they should be part of any code of ethics What is ethical varies from one situation and society to another Moral standards should be seen as being individualistic; what one person considers to be moral may be judged to be immoral by another person There is too much food advertising directed at children Advertisers use tricks and gimmicks to get children to buy their products Advertising to children makes false claims about utrition content of food products There is too much sugar in the foods advertised to children Advertising teaches children bad eating habits Advertising directed at children leads to family con? ict Attitude toward use of nutritional information Relativism 1. Different types of moralities cannot be compared as to ‘‘ rightness’’ Questions of what is ethical for everyone can never be resolved since what is moral or immoral is up to the individual Moral standards are simply personal rules which indicate how a person should behave, and are not to be applied in making judgments of others

Ethical considerations in interpersonal relations are so complex that individuals should be allowed to formulate their own individual codes Rigidly codifying an ethical position that prevents certain types of actions could stand in the way of better human relations and adjustment No rule concerning lying can be formulated; whether a lie is permissible or not permissible totally depends upon the situation Whether a lie is judged to be moral or immoral depends upon the circumstances surrounding the actions 1. 2. 3. 4. I usually pay attention to nutrition information when I see it in an ad or elsewhere

I use nutrition information on the label when making most of food selections I don’t spend much time in the supermarket reading nutrition information I read about nutrition in magazines or books 310 Aysen Bakir and Scott J. Vitell References Ahuja, R. D. , M. Walker and R. Tadepalli: 2001, ‘ Paternalism, Limited Paternalism, and the Pontius Plate Plight When Researching Children’, Journal of Business Ethics 32, 81–92. Barnett, T. : 2001, ‘ Dimensions of Moral Intensity and Ethical Decision Making: An Empirical Study’, Journal of Applied SocialPsychology31(5), 1038–1057. Bass, K. , T. Barnett and G.

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