

# The ethics of food advertising targeted toward children: parental viewpoint

[Business](#), [Marketing](#)



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1007/s10551-009-0084-2 The Ethics of Food Advertising 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 significantly important to marketers (McNeal, 1998). Many marketers spend millions of dollars on advertising to reach this growing segment (Jardine and Wentz, 2005). More specifically, food and beverage companies in the USA spend an estimated US \$10–12 billion targeting children and adolescents (McKay, 2005). According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, children are exposed to more than 7,600 commercials on candy, cereal, and fast food in 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

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public advocacy groups criticize the food companies and television networks concerning the increased amounts spent as well as the types of promotional efforts targeted at children (Aysen Bakir Scott J. Vitell at children (York, 2007). Furthermore, statistics provide substantial concern about obesity, 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 standards 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, 2005). 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 significant attention in the marketing literature. This paper attempts to fill 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 ethical 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 once 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 influenced breakfast food and snack preferences (Goldberg et al. , 1978). Finally, exposure to advertisements has also been shown to influence 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 children have risen significantly 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 influence ethical decision-making, including situational factors (Hunt and Vitell, 1986) and individual differences (Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Jones, 1991). Ethical (or unethical) behavior is influenced directly by the ethical judgments and behavioral intentions of the individuals. An individual's ethical judgment is defined 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) defined 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 familycommunicationpatterns 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 of childhood 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 one 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 of 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 deficiencies 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 nutrition education in schools (Crosby et al. , 1982). Research has also shown the positive impact of parental influence 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 significant impact on children's consumption of 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 information will be positively related to their behavioral intentions of the food advertising targeted at children. H3: Moral intensity Jones (1991) defines 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) identified six categories (magnitude of consequences, probability of effect, temporal immediacy, concentration of effect, proximity, and social consensus) of the moral intensity construct. The first four items refer to the various dimensions of harm the action might cause.



More specifically, magnitude of consequences refers to the cumulative 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 influenced 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 influences 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 influence 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 right 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 defined as a belief that moral standards are relative to one's culture or society. Forsyth (1992) also indicates that relativistic individuals might formulate 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 specifics 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 specific situation and its possible

consequences. 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 significant attention recently due to the health concerns of children and increased obesity rates (York, 2007), specific 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 children. 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 targeted 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 located 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 significant 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 displays 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 filled 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 attitude 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 study	Graduate degree	Household 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 Likert-type scales, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The reliability of the scale was 0.83 for 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 positively related to their ethical judgments of the food advertising targeted at children. The three scenarios tested did not indicate significant differences. The ANOVA results were: scenario 1:  $F(7, 152) = 26.836, p < 0.001$ ; scenario 2:  $F(7, 158) = 11.334, p < 0.001$ ; and scenario 3:  $F(7, 160) = 21.468, p < 0.001$ . 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 significant differences. The

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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 findings. 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 significant 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 significant differences regarding the first two scenarios, but there were significant 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 results 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 significant 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 significant 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 significant 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 significant 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 significant 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 moral philosophy is related to their ethical judgments of the food advertising targeted at

children. Parents' idealism was not significantly related to their ethical judgments. 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 significant. 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 philosophy is related to their ethical judgments of the food advertising targeted at children. H10 measured 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 significantly 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 significant differences among parents' relativism regarding the behavioral intentions for the first 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 fill this gap by examining how parents view various types of food advertising directed at children. Children as consumers have become significantly 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 significant portion of all advertising spending for marketers while food advertising targeted at children has received significant criticism from both parents and public policy-makers. The findings 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 findings indicated that parents' attitude toward food advertising did not affect their ethical judgments and behavioral intentions concerning specific food advertising directed at their children. One of the reasons for not finding a significant 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 scale measuring attitudes toward food advertising. This finding provides important implications for marketers which might indicate that parents evaluate specific 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 findings.

The third scenario, in particular, focused on specific 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 significant 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 facilities 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 first 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 toward use of nutrition information and ethical perspectives regarding food advertising. Moral intensity significantly affected parents' ethical judgments and behavioral intentions. This finding offers significant 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 advertising. The moral intensity measure of proximity was not significantly 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 findings relative to social consensus and its effect on their ethical judgments and behavioral intentions were significant, in most instances.

Thus, parents did consider what others might think about a specific 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 significant 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 significantly affected their ethical judgments and behavioral intentions but only for the second scenario. Relativism might be more likely to influence 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 fill out the questionnaire individually or as a couple, we could not verify whether or not they communicated with each other. This raises the possibility of a potential demand artifact. 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 findings provide insights only from parents in the Midwestern USA. These findings 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 intensified 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 findings assist both research and theory in the children's advertising field. With the increasing prominence of ethics in business/marketing research, this study presents important findings 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 field.

Appendix A: scenarios

Scenario 1 A food company whose products are, in part, targeted 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 specific 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 financial 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-flavored candies and can learn to count using various forms of calorie and sugar-laced 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 wrong, irrespective of the benefits 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 sacrifice 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 nutrition 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 conflict 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.

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