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**Research objective**

Combining these findings, the following research goal and relevance was formulated:
‘A theoretically well-defined framework helps to uncover the complex power relations (e.g., between young adolescents and their peers, between them and their parents, between them and the advertising industry) involved in disadvantaged young adolescents’ everyday brand consumption as a means for social identity construction, social positioning and wellbeing. The dimensions and instances of both structure and agency that are thereby identified will help to formulate contextualized arguments and directions for further academic research and, more importantly, societal (non-)intervention regarding advertising literacy and consumption.’

RQ: What power relations, operationalized through the notions of structure and agency, are at play in young disadvantaged adolescents’ brand consumption? And what are the arguments for and against concerns (and interventions) regarding the commercialization of young people’s lives and the role of advertising (literacy) therein? Hence, is there still a need for advertising literacy?

Theoretical framework

Apart from the thematic correspondence (i.e., social positioning through consumption; the expression of taste and legitimized – cultural – capital in order to distinguish oneself from others), Bourdieu’s (1984) distinction theory was selected to constitute the theoretical framework for two main related reasons. Firstly, the underlying idea of a field analysis centralizes the power relations that are at stake in social phenomena and practices (i.e., brand consumption among young disadvantaged adolescents). Secondly, apart from having to deal with structuring principles that seem to be out of people’s control (i.e., having to follow ‘the rules’ of the game in a particular field), there is always room for agency for those involved. Individual positions within a social field are never entirely fixed.

In addition, Bourdieu (1984) provides a useful set of analytic tools to carry out a field analysis, composed of core concepts like habitus as well as economic, cultural and social capital. Considering brand sneakers as cultural capital, the subtypes of the latter (i.e., objectified cultural capital, embodied cultural capital and ‘manner’) enabled a comprehensive inquiry of the complexities underlying a seemingly simplistic and superficial phenomenon (i.e., young people following the industry’s and each other’s suggestions like passive dopes).

Research methodology and methods

Considering the extant hiatuses and current objectives, a qualitative-interpretative approach was preferred. Since there was a complementary yet distinctive focus (i.e., advertising literacy and SES; brand consumption), the research was composed of two phases (P), subdivided in four stages (S).

- In P1 (S1), 12 focus groups were organized among 59 pupils attending the last year of (one of the six selected) elementary school(s). During these conversations, the main emphasis lay on the topic advertising, yet explorative questions were also asked about the subject of brand consumption.

- In P2, which was carried out in just one secondary school, observations in the playground (P2) preceded (during S2) and complemented (during S3 and S4) the organization of 10 focus groups with in total 40 pupils. During these conversations, the main emphasis lay on the topic of brand consumption and social connections (S3) and brand consumption and childhood experiences (S4).

The ages of the participants ranged from 11 to 14, for young adolescents are usually not the prime respondents in advertising literacy research. Either younger children are selected (i.e., based on the cognitive developmental theories they are the ones that should be worried about most) or older adolescents are (i.e., since they tend to come earlier in contact with more intricate advertising instances through their intense new media use). Furthermore, these young people find themselves going through an important transitional phase. Moving on from elementary to secondary school implies that they enter new social environments in which they have to look for their place again. This is a crucial time in which identities are even more in crisis (Erikson, 1968), challenged and need to be (re)constructed (through the consumption of brands/symbolic meanings amongst others).

Since the research participants were sampled and the data were gathered in a school context (i.e., in P1 four of these were located in the Brussels metropolitan area and two in a suburban area, in P2 the school as located in the Brussels metropolitan area), the low(er) SES factor was operationalized via an existing indicator, officially installed
by the Flemish Department of Education: the ‘student characteristics’. The higher schools score on these characteristics, the more disadvantaged their populations are. The characteristics include the elements: 1) the home language not being Dutch; 2) the maternal level of education being lower than secondary school; 3) the allocation of allowances and school grants; and 4) the level of grade retention in the area.

Results

The actual analysis or results section is composed of three parts, covering three different themes.

A first results chapter deals with the link between low(er) SES and advertising literacy. Although it does not contain the main analysis of this dissertation, the findings contribute to a more contextualized approach on advertising literacy. For example, the disadvantaged young adolescents emphasizing the informative function of advertising, proves that this should not a priori be interpreted as showcasing a low(er) level of advertising literacy. Their mentioning of the function does not exclude their understanding of more complex instances of advertising. It does reflect their everyday life experiences and routines. They take on active roles in looking for bargains and offers, either for the family or for themselves.

Also, the participants’ disadvantaged backgrounds often concurred with migration backgrounds (i.e., most often the second or third generation), which implied that a large part of the media use was international (i.e., non-Western). This is important when developing educational programs for example. It not only means children might have very different perceptions and experiences about what kinds and amounts of advertising there are, it leads to the additional complexity that communicated rules and regulations (i.e., in Flanders) might completely contradict what is perceived and experienced in real life.

A second results chapter contains the young disadvantaged adolescents’ experiences with and evaluations of current notions of childhood. This separate chapter was necessary to complement the adult-constructed notions of what it means to be a child (i.e., in academic as well as societal contexts) and to contextualize the participants’ numerous and elaborate discussions relating brand consumption. Not doing so might trigger the conclusion that all circles around brand consumption and cultural capital, while this might only be an impression, caused by this research-induced focus. Including information about their hopes, dreams, fears towards the future, and their duties and rights just like notions of freedom experienced now nuances the importance they attach to brand consumption (i.e., central to their micro-social peer contexts and interactions) in the light of the bigger picture.

The third, main results chapter zooms in on brand consumption as social practice; a means to establish one’s social position. Brands, branded sneakers first and foremost, function as cultural capital among disadvantaged young adolescents. Unexpectedly, though, the economic capital underlying all other types of capital, was explicitly indicated as the objective of brand consumption, way more often than it was designated a matter of (showing off good) taste. The third person-effect was often present in these cases: others were doing it for these reasons, while ‘just liking it’ (i.e., the brand) was the personal argumentation. The chapter elaborately uncovers the complex power relationships that come into force. For example, brand consumption, or the gathering and demonstration of cultural capital, is not simply the expression of following social and industry forces, nor of claiming/expressing to be better than someone else (i.e., pretentious or distinctive behaviour). It is often a rational decision to avoid social exclusion (i.e., conceptualized as rational minimalism; covering the basics). Or, another example, while there is firm awareness of the arbitrary nature of brands as valuable cultural capital (i.e., arguments like ‘it is just a logo’ or ‘some lines’), there is little consciousness about one’s own contributions to the legitimization of this status of brands. That way, one can be powerful (i.e., knowledgeable) and powerless (i.e., not acting upon that knowledge) at the same time.

In general, the multi-dimensional notion of authenticity is crucial in the power claims running throughout brand consumption. Firstly, authenticity on a personal level is essential, which comes close to what Bourdieu (1984) has called the ‘manner’ or ‘embodied cultural capital’. The more natural one’s brand wearing behaviour is (i.e., expression of cultural and economic capital), the less contested it will be. Conversely, if (the provenance of) cultural capital is questioned, social scrutiny mechanisms are set in motion. For example, if one does not have the means to consume cultural capital by the speed of fashion or, worse, if cultural capital is borrowed, one should not showcase pretentious behaviour. That would cause intense social commenting. Secondly, authenticity on the
level of the brand is important. Knowing that the cultural capital you possess is authentic (i.e., the real brand), puts you in a powerful position. Purchasing counterfeit, on the other hand, can be a tactical way to avoid social exclusion or a means to gain a powerful position, if the counterfeit is not detected. However, there is always the threat of getting a ‘label check’; having to prove the brand’s authenticity. Although chance still exist that one passes, even though the brand is counterfeit, this social practice leaves the owner in a very vulnerable, powerless position until the authenticity is confirmed by others (i.e., not necessarily corresponding to the reality, sometimes counterfeit is good enough to pass the test.)

Conclusions

The results confirm the need for advertising literacy research and interventions, on the condition that brand consumption practices are integrated. That way, the lived experiences of advertising in a broader context are integrated, particularly in the case of young (disadvantaged) adolescents. Facing numerous identity challenges, these young consumers can be very susceptible to the symbolic meanings inherent to commercial messages, meanings that are (supposedly) transferred through the (brand) items that are advertised. Furthermore, a focus on brand consumption practices stimulates young people to evaluate and reflect upon their own contributions to the social and symbolic (ir)relevancies of certain consumer goods. It seems like that would generate a more inclusive and profound version of empowerment, one that moves beyond merely sensitizing about what others (i.e., the marketing and advertising industry) try to accomplish.

Still, it is not concluded that the latter are off the hook. Especially advertising strategies affecting (i.e., using) peer connections should be accompanied with ethical considerations. For example, on social networks sometimes product or brand suggestions appear because social contacts have already shown an interest in these or even purchased them. (Suggesting you do the same, to be like your friends.) Such techniques take advantage of existing social connections and stimulate ideas of social competition. While social identification would be a positive outcome, the competitiveness potentially causing detrimental effects regarding economic capital and mental wellbeing should not be underestimated. Similarly, celebrity branding should be contextualized, particularly in case of less detectable sponsored blog posts, for example. While young people understand the existence and objectives of this strategy, the status of the celebrity in case overrules the critical evaluation of and differentiation between consumer wishes and needs.

Two tangible initiatives were taken to contribute to the critical evaluation of advertising (and) consumption. The first one is published as a book chapter. It is a theoretical exposition of a Critical advertising pedagogy that details how the different dimensions of advertising (i.e., its content, its strategies, etc.) can be discussed in a pedagogical context, thereby starting from the lived experiences of the pupils and focussing on enabling as well as constraining features. The second one has a more pragmatic focus; it is a workshop on the subject of young adolescents, advertising, brand consumption and wellbeing. Through a series of creative and interactive activities, young adolescents are stimulated to think about notions like needs versus wishes, symbolic meanings and identity construction and how these facets affect their consumer behaviour and attentiveness or susceptibility to advertising messages.