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Ethical marketing in light of childhood: Wall’s “ethical poetic circle” applied to the food sector

Abstract : Based on in-depth interviews with fifteen marketing managers from the food industry, this article explores how these managers constantly construct and reconstruct the ethical meaning of their practice. We suggest analysing the recurring problem of marketing ethics through the prism of childhood, following Wall (2010) who proposes a new form of ethical reflection through the metaphor of the ethical poetic circle. The latter, applied to food marketing, leads us to re-examine the role of the marketing function, to glimpse the limits of the concept of social responsibility in marketing, and to explore the virtues of an ethical approach which is specific to each sector. This pragmatic approach to ethics requires genuine deliberation with stakeholders.

Key words: Ethics; Marketing to children; Food Marketing; Ethical poetic circle; Wall.

Le marketing éthique à la lumière de l'enfance : le « cercle poétique éthique » de Wall appliqué au secteur alimentaire

Résumé : Reposant sur des entretiens approfondis avec quinze managers marketing de l'agroalimentaire cet article explore la façon dont ces responsables construisent et reconstruisent sans cesse le sens éthique de leur pratique. Nous proposons d'analyser la problématique récurrente de l'éthique marketing au prisme de l'enfance, en suivant Wall (2010) qui invite à une nouvelle réflexion éthique à travers la métaphore du cercle poétique éthique. Ce dernier appliqué au marketing agroalimentaire conduit à réexaminer le rôle de la fonction marketing, d'entrevoir les limites du concept de responsabilité sociale en marketing et d'explorer les vertus d'une approche éthique par filière. Cette approche pragmatique de l'éthique nécessite d'entrer véritablement en délibération avec les parties prenantes.

Mots clés : Ethique ; Marketing jeunesse ; Marketing Agroalimentaire ; Cercle Poétique Ethique ; Wall.

Introduction

Recently, a collective of scientists and community leaders have claimed that marketing and advertising of excessively sugary, fatty, and salted products targeting children raises a public health problem. Noting the failure of manufacturers' self-regulation to limit child exposure to junk food, they urged the French government to legislate more strongly ¹. This is a recurrent issue, as the debate on marketing and advertising to children has been going on for decades without any effect in reducing child obesity growth. Today in France, 17% of children and adolescents are overweight or obese, and 50 to 70% of them will remain so in adulthood. However, we know that overweight and obesity increase the risks of cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, fatty liver syndrome and even cancer. The intense digital marketing communication on social networks exacerbates this enduring problem. The World Health Organization alerts: "*Childhood obesity and marketing of unhealthy products are among the major areas of concern, digital marketing for these products is a new public health challenge that must be urgently combated.*"².

Despite some recent opportunities to reinforce legislative constraints ³, France appears to be a laggard compared to other countries such as Norway (2023) or UK (2018). In this context of lagging regulation, the responsibility of manufacturers, marketing managers as well as advertising practitioners is once again at stake. No marketing manager can escape his/her responsibility towards young consumers when creating, advertising, and distributing food products regularly eaten by children.

From a theoretical standpoint, a sizable number of discussions have been conducted in the fields of Marketing Ethics and of Food Marketing Targeting Children. The sustainability impetus has increased, as well as societal expectations for increased accountability and responsibility from corporations (Ertz & Le Bouhart, 2022). Nonetheless, the advertising battle over children (Nairn & Fine, 2008), along with unchanged marketing techniques to promote junk food to children, show that significant changes in food child-oriented markets are slow to come. Moreover, some marketing initiatives such as McDonald's intervention into vaccination or education contribute towards blurring the ethical grounds of marketing policies aimed at children. On the one hand, legal measures regarding advertising to children mainly refer to the cognitive vulnerability of the child. On the other hand, the developmental perspective about childhood used to design new products to adapt tastes or sizes to children's intake leads to a direct targeting of the child empowered as a consumer. Thus, marketing practitioners hold an ambiguous role as they consider the child either as a vulnerable human being who needs to be protected by law, or as an autonomous person to whom marketers can directly speak. These

¹ Le Monde, 28 octobre 2023.

² Ibidem

³ Loi n° 2018-938 du 30 octobre 2018, loi pour l'équilibre des relations commerciales dans le secteur agricole et alimentaire, et une alimentation durable et accessible à tous ; Loi climat et résilience du 22 août 2021, Loi n° 2021-1104 portant lutte contre le dérèglement climatique et renforcement de la résilience face à ses effets ; Loi n° 2023-451 du 9 juin 2023 visant à encadrer l'influence commerciale et à lutter contre les dérives des influenceurs sur les réseaux sociaux.

equivocal practices position the function of marketing, as well as its practitioners, in a rather unethical posture as they falsely empower children, trapped into constrained consumer choices they do not understand, leading them to be disempowered in commercial realms (Cook, 2007).

Drawing on fifteen encounters between a researcher and food marketing managers opening a discussion focused on food marketing to children, this paper explores how marketing managers construct and reconstruct the social meaning of marketing ethics, disclosing how they create the possibility of an ethical food marketing practice. Confronted with emerging unprecedented and unpredictable situations, marketing managers cannot be sure that they are taking the relevant ethical decision when they promote products to children. To pay attention to the ethical grounds of marketing to children that managers evoke, this article steps aside from marketing and draws on the work by Wall who questions ethics in light of childhood (Wall, 2010).

The first section reviews recent research dealing with the ethical foundations of the interaction between marketing and children. Then we introduce the “ethical poetic circle” formulated by Wall and suggest it offers an opportunity to renew the ethical underpinnings of marketing to children. In the third section we present our empirical work aimed at understanding how the three complex ethical dynamics that Wall has identified come into play when food marketing to children is under scrutiny. Finally, we open a discussion about the contribution of Wall’s theoretical framework to dealing with current food marketing challenges and to enriching the ongoing debate on marketing ethics in practice.

1. Responsible marketing to children: a sensitive marketing area

The public health issue of childhood obesity undeniably leads to question the relationship between marketing and childhood, a matter at the intersection of two fields of research that we will address in the first part. First, we will go through the numerous publications on the notion of ethical or responsible marketing, approaches that tend to be normative and useful for decision-makers, but which do not consider the exposure of operational managers to emerging ethical issues. We will then consider the controversial field of food marketing aimed at children, which prompts managers and researchers to adopt a truly reflexive stance.

1.1. Responsible marketing: a prolific stream of research

A series of works on ethical or responsible marketing have been developed, favouring either positive descriptive perspective (Hunt & Vitell, 1986, 2006; Ferrell & al., 2013) or normative empirical perspectives about ethics (Murphy & Laczniak, 2019; Laczniak & Schultz, 2021). By focusing on ethical decision-making in marketing, the former aim at enabling marketing managers to negotiate the relevant ethical conduct to avoid potential harmful consequences of their actions. The second approach focuses on macro-issues and seeks to generate positive impacts and limit negative impacts on stakeholders. These works elaborate a series of concepts enhancing the marketing function to meet higher ethical expectations, such as Social Marketing (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971), Sustainable Marketing (Beji-Becheur & Ozcaglar-Toulouse, 2014; Dekhili & Lavorata, 2020; Dekhili & al., 2021; Volle & Schouten,

2022) or Socially Responsible Marketing (Laczniack & Schultz, 2021; Ertz, 2021). Within this stream of research, the discussion still focuses on the relevance of a normative definition of ethics, which seems limited in scope to marketing managers' mundane decision-making. Nevertheless, ethics cannot be implemented at the level of a single function since operational managers have little room for manoeuvre and can only act in line with the organisation's CSR strategy (Ferrell & Ferrell, 2022). This descriptive and normative body of research has contributed towards shaping marketing managers' practices: they act as partial mediators of the constitution of market phenomena and draw on identifiable marketing postures (Lucarelli & Hallin, 2015; Mason & *al*, 2015).

However, the marketing discipline has paid little attention to the economic actors who help define markets and build consumer culture (Zwick & Cayla, 2011). Researchers have traced marketing practitioners' reinterpretations of the evolving and circulating discourses of social, sustainable, or socially responsible marketing (Tadajewski, 2010; Ardley & Quinn, 2014). Our research adopts this perspective as we consider that ethics is played out in a situation, admittedly under the thumb of normative injunctions, but with sufficient room left for manoeuvre or interpretation by managers. Managers are often confronted with emerging novel situations for which the law or the normative framework of the organisation or profession does not give a hint about the relevant ethical conduct to adopt.

1.2. Food marketing aimed at children: a controversial field

Recent studies in food marketing aimed at children help understand better the multiplicity of actors involved in the economic socialisation of children (Hémar-Nicolas & *al*, 2016; Ezan & *al*, 2021). Researchers identify the thematic areas which brands can use in responsible communication to children (Hémar-Nicolas & Ezan, 2018) or explore on which premises marketing could contribute towards improving children's diet. Drawing on an understanding of the child as vulnerable and suggestible, these works seek to help public authorities and companies to better regulate marketing practices aimed at children. Marketing is then conceived as a tool to promote the well-being of children and society. In any case, this stream of research sticks to the logic of empowering the child, who must be socialised to become a sufficiently competent consumer in the marketplace. This liberal approach of consumer socialisation seems to overlook the moral problems raised by brands addressing the child directly (McNeal, 1992). The approach of seeing children as apprentice consumers is a subject of ongoing controversies (Ward, 1974; Kline, 2011). The ethical foundations of marketing to children are still a battlefield for recurring confrontations. These tensions are reinforced when food brands' huge advertising campaigns pervade all the socialisation spaces that appeal to children and where they spend their leisure time (influencers on YouTube, social networks like Instagram, Snapchat, metaverses like Roblox, video games like Fortnite, etc.).

However, another strand of research sheds light on the limits of regulation alone (soft or hard), underlying the incapacity of food industries to make nutritional offers beneficial to children's health (Fleming-Milici & Harris, 2020). Other works document the difficulty of assessing the effects of regulation on children's health in the digital ecosystem (Tatlow-Golden & *al*, 2021, Boyland, 2023). For Kline (2011), regulatory interventions are unable to solve the

problem, and only succeed in distributing responsibilities between the consumer and the advertiser. Therefore, both researchers and managers are urged to adopt a reflective stance to deal with the ethical challenges imposed by regulatory or societal expectations in unprecedented situations (Guichard & Damay, 2020; Ardley & Quinn, 2014).

2. Exploring food marketing aimed at children according to Wall’s ethics

In marketing realms, the social representation of the child usually relies on interpretations of the developmental approach by Piaget (1937) stating that the child progressively reaches a sufficient cognitive and social maturity to develop an adultlike reasoning. This mainstream perspective in marketing appears to be one of the three major historical models of child-responsive ethics identified by the ethicist Wall (2010)¹ who has elaborated the concept of childism: “*the effort to respond to the experiences of children by transforming understanding and practices for all.*” (Wall, 2010, p.3). Childism calls for a radical transformation of ethical thinking in various areas of social life, as its purpose is to apply child-related experiences and perspectives to rethink theoretical approaches to ethics.

To explore the endless discussion about the possibility of responsible food marketing aimed at children, we step aside from marketing and draw on Wall’s framework. It will help us to remain focused on how marketing managers construct and reconstruct the social meaning of marketing ethics when they target young consumers.

2.1. Delineating three forms of ethics in relation to children

Within the ideological arena where different definitions of childhood are disputed, apart from the developmental one, two other conceptions co-exist. The first suggests that the child spontaneously develops a behaviour based on moral grounds and considers that children have the same capability to act as adults. The second depicts the child as a vulnerable individual in need of protection from adults who are responsible for his/her well-being. Wall observes that these three ethical perspectives are still in use when issues concerning children in society are discussed. But each of them presents specific limitations that constrain ethical thinking.

	Being	Aim	Obligation
Top-down	Unruly	Social order	Fulfilling roles
Bottom-up	Good	Natural simplicity	Respecting gifts
Developmental	In potential	Progressive rationality	Engaging in dialogue

¹ Professor of Philosophy, Religion, and Childhood Studies, as well as Director of the Childism Institute, at Rutgers University Camden (USA). He has published in the fields of political philosophy, post-structuralism, the philosophy of religion, and children’s rights.

Table 1 – The three representations of childhood – Source: Wall (2010, p.30)

The first approach suggests a progressive moral development of the child ending in a moral maturity comparable to that of the adult. Piaget considers that the child's moral autonomy increases gradually, Kohlberg, in a Kantian sense of the individual, emphasises the passage of egoism towards universalism through conventionalism, and Gilligan (1982) contends that the individual must migrate from egoism to relationality. According to Wall, this developmental logic is inappropriate to conceive ethics, as it conveys a linear development with a beginning and an end, even though the culmination of moral maturity does not necessarily occur, or rarely occurs.

The second ethical view, advocating the instilling of moral values in children, who are considered undisciplined by nature, is also irrelevant (Wall 2010, p.170). It consists of transmitting to the child values enacted by adults and meant for establishing relationships between adults. Wall qualifies this approach as “adult-centric” as it implies that the child is devoid of any moral sense, according to the meaning adults give to this expression.

The third approach sees the child as naturally invested with kindness and wisdom but presents the following limit: children's moral thought is interpreted through an adult prism and not from the point of view of children, living their own experiences and engaging in their social practices. Thus, the adult is unable to hear children's moral concerns and how they manage to deal with them. The ethics of “care” privileges situations where it is the adult who cares for the child and its main weakness lays in the fact that adults, regardless of their status – parent, NGO member, educational staff, etc. – act as spokespersons representing children whose own voices remain silenced.

These three historical representations of childhood refer to diverging streams of ethical thought, considering that moral capacity increases until a certain maturity is reached, or establishing the need for rules to master the unruly nature of the child, or seeing human beings as naturally endowed with moral goodness. However, none of these perspectives is sufficient by itself to address ethics, as no one can claim to have attained ethical maturity as advocated by developmental approaches, and symmetrically, no one can consider to be at the beginning of his moral life, in other words, not concerned with ethics.

For Wall, being ethical means willing to engage in a demanding creative endeavour implying the permanent construction and reconstruction of ethical foundations that cannot be definitive. This posture directly echoes the pragmatic approach of ethics advocated by Hargrave and al. (2020). For Wall, the art of ethical practice is an effort to extend possibilities over time and to always consider and include the other. What unites humanity is precisely the mission of constantly forming new moral horizons, to continue pragmatically to grow in ethics.

To introduce the process of developing and adapting ethical values to concrete situations, Wall utilises a poetic circle metaphor through which social meaning is constructed and reconstructed over time. *“It is poetic in the sense that it reimagines moral life as based, not on individual autonomy or on authority of traditions, but on expanding interdependent*

creativity” (Wall, 2010, p. 10). The dynamics of this poetic circle is driven by three processes: interpretation, narration, and responsiveness. Interpretation means that the “*moral being is not originally innocent, unruly, or blank, but creative*”. This creative capacity is understood as the ability “*to play amid the experiences and possibilities of life to create more meaningful worlds.*” Narration refers to the ethical purpose that justifies this creative effort and leads to expansion of the scope of moral consciousness, “*to grow in narrative wholeness overtime*”. Responsiveness includes “*the human obligation to recreate oneself in response to others in their irreducibly diverse otherness*” (Wall, 2010, p. 180). Finally, Wall points out that “*Moral life requires not just agency but a passive-active relation of self and other that allows for the creation of unanticipated new relations. The other must disrupt the hermeneutical or narrative circle of moral life that it shifts towards as yet undiscovered moral terrain*” (Wall, 2010, p. 94).

Ethics in practice is key in our research project seeking to explore the ethical underpinnings of marketing to children. The prism of childhood that structures Wall’s work is congruent with the focus of our empirical research. Additionally, the metaphor of the poetic circle with its three components could possibly help us nuance the ethical stance of marketing managers.

2.2. The child, a lever to disclose the ethical underpinnings of marketing

By questioning marketing managers and encouraging them to reflexively analyse their own practice, the aim of our research was twofold: firstly, to go beyond marketing managers’ conventional representations of ethical marketing; secondly, to trace how they argue that ethical food marketing to child consumers is possible.

Due to the difficulty of reaching the research target, we carried out intensity sampling: the interviewees were selected as experts in the field of practice under scrutiny (Patton, 1990). To allow enough variety to foster interpretive work and to enable social significance (Alami & al., 2013), they were sorted according to several criteria: size of the company, product category, gender, age, and hierarchical position. The final set of key informants included six General Managers (previously Marketing Directors), seven Marketing Directors and two Marketing Managers. Seven come from multinational companies, six from medium-sized companies and two from small-sized companies. The allocation between product categories is the following: sweet products (5), savoury products (6), and mixed (4 – including 3 selling baby food).

	Position	Size of the company	Product category	Formalisation of the ethical discourse	Duration of the interaction
Olivier	General Manager	Multinational	Sweetened and Savoury	Integrated into strategy	75 mn
Dominique	Marketing Director	Intermediary size	Savoury	Integrated into strategy	70 mn
Isabelle	Marketing Director	Multinational	Sweetened and Savoury	Integrated into strategy	65 mn

Violette	Marketing Director	Small size	Sweetened and Savoury	Integrated into strategy	84 mn
Mathieu	Marketing Director	Intermediary size	Savoury	Not very formalised	103 mn
Mélanie	Marketing Director	Multinational	Sweetened	Formalised	53 mn
Véronique	Marketing Director	Intermediary size	Savoury	Not very formalised	131 mn
Donatienne	Marketing Manager	Multinational	Sweetened and Savoury	Formalised	62 mn
Joséphine	Marketing Director	Intermediary size	Savoury	Not very formalised	97 mn
Luc	General Manager	Intermediary size	Savoury	Not very formalised	94 mn
Suzanne	General Manager	Intermediary size	Savoury	Not very formalised	46 mn
Maryline	Marketing Manager	Multinational	Sweetened and Savoury	Formalised	55 mn
Guillaume	General Manager	Small size	Sweetened	Integrated into strategy	105 mn
Nicole	General Manager	Multinational	Sweetened	Integrated into strategy	56 mn
Jean-Marie	General Manager	Multinational	Sweetened	Very formalised	45 mn

Table 2: Presentation of participants and duration of the interactions

The originality of our research lies in the method used to conduct the interviews and to implement an accurate discourse analysis. We wondered what makes ethical marketing to children possible, through two paths of exploration. What representation do marketing managers have of what constitutes ethical food marketing? How do they play the role of marketing ethically when addressing the researcher?

We used interview techniques to avoid rational or socially desirable discourses and to encourage interviewees to outline personal views. The interviewing method highlighted ethical dilemmas in the field of marketing to children, urging managers to disclose the foundations of their professional conscience. Considering the organisational and institutional context in which managers develop their work, we traced the arguments they drew from various legitimised institutional discourses to give meaning to their work and justify their practice. Through various self-presentations made during the interview, managers tried to articulate contrasting polarities or link paradoxical dimensions of their role. Their discourse oscillated between a quest for professional recognition and an avoidance of uncomfortable situations relative to pervasive or intrusive marketing techniques in children's lives.

Discourse analysis combined two complementary interpretive lines. Firstly, through a thematic analysis, we identified marketing managers' social representations, postures, and practices regarding marketing to children. The discursive elaboration through which managers

present and legitimise their professional practice, when confronted with some controversies and abuses that characterise marketing to children, was a key element of the conversation with the researcher. The managers' discourse continually strove to put into practice their values in accordance with the objectives set by the organisation... and revealed when this effort had become too difficult. Secondly, a "sociological intra-individual approach" identified managers' efforts to build self-consistency (Kaufmann, 2007) when faced with constraints, contradictions, and resistance. Understanding managers' ongoing efforts to build a consistent ethical standpoint in the face of criticisms addressed at marketing to children requires an understanding of the concrete and symbolic elements which managers use to signal, qualify, and justify the ethical grounds on which their professionalism is anchored. Hodgson (2005) emphasises that professional conscience reveals imposed mechanisms of self-discipline and performance to which managers align, as well as their grappling with different ethical issues, sometimes in a very fuzzy context with few or no points of reference to deal with unaddressed ethical issues.

This detailed two-fold analysis enabled us to grasp the symbolic, organisational, and personal resources that each manager gathered and combined to answer our questions on the spot. What means do managers mobilise to legitimise both the scope of responsibilities of marketing managers and their professional conscience? Do their discourses shape the ethical issues at stake in their professional practice, and contribute towards delineating the ethical foundations of marketing to children?

3. Wall's "ethical poetic circle" applied to food marketing to children

We introduce the results of our investigation by using Wall's ethical poetic circle. These theoretical lenses help us identify the nuances that coexist in the arguments deployed by the managers and shed light on the importance of considering the radical otherness of the child to elaborate with his/her representatives local and situated ethical responses to issues raised by food marketing to children.

For Wall, a moral being is a person who utilises his/her own history, life experiences or social encounters, culture, traditions, etc. with the purpose of constantly shaping his/her moral imagination to meet unexpected circumstances. The author mentions the situation of a ten-year-old girl, Britt, who is suffering from a serious illness. Faced with the distress of her younger brother, who worries a lot about her, Britt manages to draw on the experiences and values she has developed so far, especially the importance of her family bonds and the pride of having already won other fights, to be able not only to face the idea of her own end, but also to preserve her little brother from the fear that invades him. Britt recreates a positive story where she appears as a fighter, while being decentred, enabling her to take a protective role towards her little brother. "*Part of Britt's moral task is to fashion these given ways of thinking, however much they cohere or conflict with one another, into a growing sense of the meaning of her experiences in the here and now.*" (Wall, 2010 p. 173). Thus, moral imagination implies developing forms of creativity to reinterpret unusual situations, to build new narratives including unexpected circumstances and to offer a supportive response to people in distress.

3.1. The dynamics of moral interpretation

For Wall, behaving ethically means drawing on one's lived experiences and the possibilities that life offers to generate new worlds of meaning. In some cases, confronting an unexpected situation, the individual might react by restricting his/her moral horizon. This happens when the person sets aside a part of himself, of his/her own personal history, of his/her social context or his/her personality and restricts the breadth of his/her moral values by clinging to a single value. However, in other cases, people are led to expand their moral thinking to include new ethical stakes and consider new points of view. Indeed, moral interpretation proposed by Wall might shrink or expand the values on which individual moral reasoning rests. Some of our interviewees seemed to have limited their moral horizon solely to shareholder value, by setting aside a series of ethical principles, overlooking significant social relationships or even the interactions between economic activity and nature, or simply ignoring the diversity of other possible ethical postures.

“When you are on the board of directors, you have to keep in mind the economic and profitable dimensions of the company. We belong to an investment fund (...) so we do not have too much choice.” (Véronique)

“In the companies, the number one problem is profitability, (...) and suddenly, we have to have an ROI on all actions and that's it!” (Joséphine)

“In the end everything ends with your bottom line” (Maryline)

“Business first (...) if we don't bring in any money, if we don't earn money, we will necessarily have missed out on something bigger (said quietly) (...) because business always comes first. (...) I am a machine for creating business, I'm not wrong” (Guillaume)

However, in other cases, the work of moral interpretation leads marketing managers to extend the scope of ethical possibilities, even within a difficult context. Violette chose to leave the multinational company that had been employing her for several years to join the new venture created by her husband. Violette draws on her family rural culture, her professional experiences, and her personal values that have nurtured her professional skills and ethical stance. Focused on the consolidation of their family, she reinterprets the meaning of her mission as a marketing manager.

“I left (Name of multinational) a short time ago (...) to come work here (...) with (Name of her husband) who founded the company. (...) M.(her husband's first name) was at McKinsey at the time, we had just had our first daughter and in fact he arrived one morning saying, you know I don't want to miss out things, well that's it, and so I'm going to stop my job, finally to be an employee at McKinsey because they send me three months here, three months there, without being able to enjoy either my wife or my children (...) So he did (...) the training for business buyers, (...) and through the observation that he made himself: he would not eat himself the food that he gave his daughter. As our daughter grew up, she was old enough to finally diversify her diet, he said to himself,

there is something to do, and he started working on this project. And it took a year, a little over a year: the time to develop the whole mix, to find partners, to have, to be well-armoured on all the regulatory aspect which is heavy on baby food, and then, and then, to get his first customer.(...) We had a second child, then a third child and the observation was more and more obvious (light laugh). I had my third child and then I went on a slightly extended maternity leave (...). During this period, (...) I wanted to make myself useful and so I started to lend a hand here. (...) in the rather gloomy ambient context at (name of the multinational) through multiple layoff plans. So, I took advantage of this context to leave and come and invest a little more here where I and my added value were more needed. (Violette)

By making a different choice since she has not left her company, Isabelle, relies on her previous professional experiences in the Tobacco industry and on her current marketing mission on the baby food category. Although baby food seems an ethical category, Isabelle's moral interpretation enhances her will to surpass herself by meeting new challenges. Beyond her commitment to the commercial side of her job, she is eager to open her work to new perspectives related to sustainable development. She sets up internally and hosts a working group to promote sustainable practices, despite the potential risk this initiative might have on her career.

“It depends on what perspective we take, because we can be in the context of struggle and opposition, or you can be in a perspective where you build things, where you improve things over time, and you move the lines little by little. But it requires a lot of determination, a lot of energy (...), it clashes with economic logic, the logic of profit!” (Isabelle)

Violette and Isabelle, through the changes they undergo in their career paths, account for their ability to expand their interpretation of ethics, even at the cost of doubts and complex changes in their own lives. In contrast, other managers, who are unable to reconsider their moral horizon, find themselves forced to accept various compromises. We noticed that they did not personally engage in their discourse, either by using “You” instead of “I” (Maryline), or by invoking the excuse of competition rules (Nicole), or by complaining that the regulations have become instrumentalised (Donatienne) or mentioning the resistance of the consumer (Joséphine).

“you are obliged to enter into a system which, in any case, but I speak in my name, I do not speak for (name of the company), is not the one which you would have joined from the outset, that is to say that, and also because you are in a mass industry, you cannot be in an ideal system as you would like to do it if it were your company.” (Maryline)

“We can't be Care Bears either: if everyone does something and we stop ourselves from doing something, we put ourselves in a negative competitive situation. So, encourage the profession to engage in self-regulation, so that we maintain a market that is competitive, that we are on equal terms, but that we decide that there are things that we

can do and there are things we can't do, that's what I call responsibility. (...) At the end of the day, good feelings only work if we keep our market share” (Nicole)

“We give ourselves specifications together which encourage us, for example, not to communicate with children under the age of twelve. That means no purchasing space from these programs on TV, nor in specific programs for them to avoid influencing them, in any case not on food which could be considered by the European Union, not necessarily healthy, to always offer in the children's menu intended for the little ones, solutions of choice which are nutritional. So, for example, no more than 500 calories in the (name of the offer intended for children). You can always choose water, a fruit, a yogurt to drink. Finally, there are differences depending on the country, do not put forward sodas, well, things like that.” (Donatienne)

“(…) what's very hard, I find in our profession, is to continue to have, well, to try to continue to have ethics and a conscience because in fact we surrender (...) When we try to do things well, the consumer, ultimately, they don't care a little bit, when we don't do things well uh, they don't necessarily know it and, from time to time, there is a crisis (louder voice) which explodes and there, in any case, everyone takes a hit. Palm oil, all the people who add palm oil, took it in their faces as soon as...well, the number of reports there were saying ah, even there is some, even there is some in there even though in fact it was tiny quantities. Well, I find that it's, (...) frankly, a bit stupid but it reassured me in the idea of telling myself that ultimately, what mattered most was the taste, but, on the other hand, I think that we shouldn't do it at any price. That is to say that for me, (...) everything that I experienced while trying to doing things well in the specific sectors for example and which have had no impact on sales and everything I see, on palm oil and co, which ultimately do not really have any impact either, I think, on the sales of the competitors (...) The fact of having re-opened to natural aromas, well really for me it (...) was brutal to say to myself, well what are we going to do there because, in any case, we try to do well, to do well, to do well but if our products no longer have any taste, we have difficulty keeping the consumer. So, it opens your eyes to the bad side, we will say, even if, honestly, I do it ethically and I am sure that there is no impact on health. (...) Yes, it cost me. (...) Well, I felt, in fact, what bothered me was to say to myself, in fact, we can't do without it.” (Joséphine)

However, the capacity for moral reinterpretation is the first facet of the ethical poetic circle, which must be pursued, in a spiralling movement aimed at increasing the moral completeness of the individual. This completeness develops, not only by placing his/her personal story in a broader context, but also by considering new moral references enhancing the search for a sensible answer to unexpected ethical challenges. This demanding work develops through a social process that Wall identifies as the dynamics of narration.

3.2. The dynamics of narration

According to Wall, the weakness of classical ethical thought lays in its conception of ethics as a timeless notion. But life experience undergone by every human being consists of a

temporality and nourishes the desire to experience intensely the widest possible time, which does not mean the longest, but the most meaningful. For Wall, “*narration is how time grows over time into meaning*” (Wall 2010, p.68), suggesting the image of a circle that gradually widens through timespan. This expanding circle conveys the idea of enriching the meaning of our existence, not only by expressing our inner self, but also by contributing towards generating social meaning in a broader context and putting our own story in a wider narrative. “*Increasing narrative growth over time is the internal desire of our creative ethical being*” (Wall 2010, p. 74). This ethical work gives meaning to time, allowing professional and ethical practice to be integrated into pre-existing narratives that must, in an expansive way, be permanently enriched. We need to liberate our own story from mere predetermination or novelty to consider that it is in permanent shaping, in perpetual narrative expansion. Wall illustrates the notion of narrative expansion, referring to Anne Frank, who was forced to hide for two years with her family to escape the Nazi persecution of Jews. In her diary, she gives an account of mundane problems within her family or her seemingly adolescent concerns. But, as time goes on, her writing expands her sense of concern about the situation she is experiencing. She does not understand why Dutch people, usually so honest and right, allow themselves to judge the Jews, the most oppressed and unhappy people in the world. Anne Frank’s diary exemplifies the work of narrative expansion, as she proves through her effort to achieve a broader understanding of her life, a tremendous humanity, linking it to the complex history of anti-Semitism, oppression, and resilience.

Among our informants only two managers seemed involved in a work of narrative expansion. Dominique puts his own story as a marketing manager within a larger organisational context. He goes beyond the scope of his function, considering that as a marketing practitioner, his societal role is to strive for a better future for forthcoming generations. Applying the motto of “*marketing for a better world*”, he tries to enrich the meaning of his job. Dominique demonstrates how, in the context of the environmental and social ransacking caused by the deployment of intensive agriculture, he reconceives his professional role within a wider challenge than just the issue of designing attractive products for the consumer.

“What's important is that things that create value, create difference, create attachment, it's pure marketing for me. But in the noble sense of the word, really, in the marketing sense. It's the only way to keep marketing going tomorrow.” (Dominique)

Violette expresses the need to dare going beyond the frontiers of her job mission and trying to replace it in a broader picture.

“When we arrive at a brand, we are told that: the ‘bright side’! It's really, it's great, that's it, that's it and suddenly, when we build the plans, we are no longer free at all because it's too easy to challenge us on lots of things (...) we are no longer at all anticipating or creating ideas which could lead to positive things but we are a little ‘brainwashed’ (...) I find that we lack curiosity, that is, we have a lack of curiosity that is blatant and completely deplorable. (...) I really think it's the choice of simplicity. I have information, I process it, I do my job, great! It takes a little violence to go and (...) open your eyes a little to other things, to ask yourself questions. And then, in their

defence, we work like dogs so, already with the amount of work we have (laughs). So, it's not necessarily, in the evening, when we come home, we don't necessarily want to look into the carcinogenic side of (name of a category of products), it's not necessarily our thing, well there you go! Ultimately, I don't have any resentment towards, towards people who are like that, I just say that the system maintains that.” (Violette)

What is worth remarking in the transformation that Dominique and Violette operate in their role of marketing manager, is their willingness to take others into account, whoever they may be: consumers, distributors, or producers. They both expand their narration to make it more inclusive and conscious of their responsibility in establishing meaningful relationships with a variety of stakeholders. They also try to find new responses to meet the expectations of these others, which brings us to the third dimension proposed by Wall in the depiction of his “ethical poetic circle”: responsiveness.

3.3. The dynamics of responsiveness

For Wall, the notion of responsiveness can be summarised as: *“the human obligation to recreate oneself in response to others (including oneself as another) in their irreducibly diverse otherness.”* (Wall 2010, p. 180). The moral obligation conveyed by responsiveness makes it necessary to include in this circle, asymmetrically, a second centre attributed to the other. Wall invites his readers to decentre themselves in order to integrate the other in his/her difference, allowing themselves to be disturbed by him/her. The moral disturbance caused by the consideration of the other calls for a desire for openness to the vulnerability of the other and to think what it means to live and act ethically in the social world.

After joining her current company, Véronique was involved in an immersive experience consisting of sharing the life of consumers and their mealtimes to better understand their behaviours and attitudes. She shared the daily life of a mother and her daughter, both overweight, for several days in a row. She observed that over the days the menu did not change – potatoes cooked in a large amount of oil. When Véronique asked them about their motivations to eat this dish daily, they answered they were applying their doctor’s recommendation to eat vegetables every day. This unexpected response morally disturbed Véronique and led her to expand her marketing role to improve consumers’ nutritional knowledge.

We can also listen to Mathieu, who acknowledges that he is morally disturbed by the obesity issue of one young family member. Being a marketing manager for sweet products, he asks himself about his own responsibility in this phenomenon.

“At the same time, working for (Brand of sweet products positioned as being eco-responsible), I found it great because the whole story, but I still told myself it makes you gain weight. You know what I mean, I never had to experience obesity, but for example I had a godchild who had obesity problems and I said to myself, damn that’s crazy, because I spoke to him, we tried to find solutions with his mother, it was a problem that was bothering me. I said to myself, this is crazy, because you’re schizophrenic: you sell (Brand of sweet products positioned as being eco-responsible) and you explain to him

that it's great, that it's a great brand and everything and there are obesity problems. How much do you participate? You see? (Mathieu)

Wall makes a difference between the recognition of the other as social agent, and the moral disruption caused by the other's generalised perspective. Thus, in terms of social or societal responsibility, it is important to distinguish between the mere recognition of stakeholders, and the actual consequences of this ethical stance that should lead to the acceptance of a moral disturbance triggered by any one of the stakeholders. Wall considers that a decentring ethics is distinct from Habermas' ethics of discussion (Habermas, 2013) that envisions adult dialogue based on a strong social argumentation capacity. This implies free and equal participation in social dialogue, a situation that does not suit to a child, who is recognised as an agentic actor but with less experience and power than the adult. This remark sheds light on Véronique's point that in terms of nutritional information all consumers cannot be considered on an equal footing with the marketing manager. In the case of such an imbalance, Habermas' ethics of discussion might prove deficient and lead to poor ethical choices. Finally, what Wall means by responsiveness is our duty to decentre from ourselves to create new worlds of ethical meanings, and this is an infinite endeavour: "*Moral life, in sum, is at once self-creative, self-narrative, and other-responsive*" (Wall 2010, p. 10).

4. Wall's contribution towards enhancing ethical food marketing to children

Dealing with the issue of marketing ethics through the prism of childhood highlights the limits of Corporate Social Responsibility, very often reduced to a mere utilitarian conception of ethics aimed at reducing marketing responsibility regarding children (De La Ville, 2013). Indeed, resorting only to regulation or to professional deontological charters to ensure the implementation of an ethical marketing practice proves problematic, as it prevents marketing managers from taking a long-term view to develop situated and truly sensible solutions. Consequently, considering the figure of the child consumer seems a fruitful avenue to open the discussion about marketing ethics, as it urges marketing managers to confront a threefold issue (McNeal, 1992): is the child a truly empowered consumer, able to make relevant decisions within commercial realms? On which ethical grounds can the child be used by brands as an influencer within his family or peer group? Which ethical principles should be applied to educate the child who will become tomorrow's consumer? Entering the world of childhood underlines that there is a need to renew the ethical underpinnings of marketing. There is a permanent challenge as marketing managers find themselves confronted with an ongoing flux, always renewed and undetermined, of emerging and unexpected ethical issues. The discussion about the ethical underpinnings of food marketing aimed at children utilises Wall's ethical poetic circle metaphor (Wall, 2010), which opens a space for a series of ethical considerations.

Firstly, this framework prompts us to re-examine the role of marketing by wondering if it could assume the mission of helping consumers evolve towards healthier and more eco-responsible eating habits. Wall particularly emphasises that when embracing an ethical stance, it is neither a matter of ignoring the culture, the history, the situated organisational context in which the manager finds himself, nor a matter of sticking to timeless established rules or great

universal principles. Engaging in a truly creative ethical reflection presupposes drawing inspiration from previous experiences, from gradually incorporated values and from the unexpected situation which emerges. Consequently, marketing managers cannot deny what constitutes the contemporary discipline of marketing: its history, its tools, its ideology or try to cling to a traditional conception of marketing as opposed to a transformative marketing approach (Mick, 2006). But, even if they express some tensions, marketing managers always remain within a commercial logic that sheds light on the specificities of marketing: the challenge of increasing sales that entails the ability to create new offers, finding the right way to produce and distribute products, and convincing the consumer. Indeed, the great strength of marketing consists of being able to convince consumers to consume differently (Lavorata, 2016). These possibilities are overtly evoked in the speeches of the managers we met and can be analysed as an opportunity to rely on marketing to transform the practices of organisations and consumers, as well as other stakeholders, such as raw material suppliers or communication agencies. Applying Wall's proposal to marketing practice would enable marketing managers to reimagine the organisational role of the marketing function, relying on its strength and very essence: meeting unprecedented challenges through a deep understanding of consumers' motivations and through its capacity to transform consumers' behaviour and taste. This perspective echoes considerations about the virtuous circle of social responsibility that reinforces the ability of marketing managers to "move" consumers (Smith & Elin, 2011).

However, if relying on marketing to change consumers' behaviour seems theoretically possible, it is necessary for marketing practitioners to truly integrate this new vision in their practice. Marketing managers would have to engage in a paradigm shift: no longer considering themselves as mastering persuasive techniques devoted solely to profit, but as professionals able to encourage consumers to change their eating habits towards healthier and eco-responsible choices contributing to the common good. This renewed perspective opens the discussion about the purpose of marketing's contribution to societal contemporary challenges. In many food sectors, it would foster moral creativity to develop a more socially and environmentally contributive approach, leading to an enlargement of the responsibilities of the marketing function.

Understanding marketing as a function able to mobilise consumers, and lastingly modifying their behaviour, places marketing practitioners at the very heart of the marketing strategy. The need to meet unexpected and unprecedented challenges reinforces the strategic dimension of the marketing function that seems to have been somewhat overshadowed in favour of the most visible marketing means and techniques deployed at the point of sale, via theatrical effects, or on social networks thanks to ephemeral buzz. Engaging in a demanding ethical reflection should lead marketing to reinterpret and redefine both its social contribution and the purpose of the persuasive means which it favours to address different segments of consumers.

Secondly, Wall's contribution gives us the opportunity to glimpse the limits of the concept of social responsibility in marketing and to explore the virtues of a sector-based approach to enhance responsible marketing practice. In the baby food sector, marketing managers develop a twofold meaning of ethics: on the one hand, from a deontological

standpoint, they are committed to implementing the very strict regulatory framework applying to baby food, and, on the other hand, they express the teleological dimension of their professional practice through values of solicitude and protection towards the target of toddlers, unanimously recognised as vulnerable, and trustworthiness in establishing long-lasting relationships with mothers.

When moving beyond the strict framework of corporate social responsibility officially stated by the company, marketing managers can, within their professional sector, contribute to the elaboration of normative ethical charters, as some of our informants did in the *charcuterie* trade (Suzanne) or biscuits industry (Jean-Marie). The marketing manager can choose to initiate a cooperation with circles of marketing professionals to promote a collective reflection and set up a series of indicators of ethical improvement of marketing practices. This is in line with Bergadaà's (2004) call for creating an ethical framework for the marketing profession to enhance more responsible practices. This is a necessity for marketing managers attempting to reconcile in their practice the economic and financial objectives dictated by the market and the unavoidable consideration of urging societal expectations. It corresponds to the concept of "business case" institutionalised by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, an actual plea for a win-win vision between companies and society (Capron & Quairel-Lanoizelée, 2015). According to our informants, this win-win concept is essential to convince organisational members to engage in collaborative and demanding ethical reflection.

However, if this effort by professionals is salutary, it might also create new ethical difficulties by contributing towards favouring large companies at the expenses of small ones, since the latter are likely to face some economic drawbacks in implementing the costly practices recommended by the charter. Thus, small businesses can find themselves weakened and threatened by an additional workload linked to an increase in control procedures and the sourcing of more qualitative raw materials, probably of a higher price. Moreover, initiating this type of practice might be a long-term effort with relatively limited impact if the quality norms which are collectively defined stick to the lowest common denominator. Furthermore, self-regulatory and lobbying practices developed by industrialists involved in the importation of palm oil might hinder the initiation and the development of global regulation against deforestation (Condamin & al., 2016), generating another ethical critical issue in the context of global warning.

Our results confirm that we are ultimately witnessing a broadening of the performance criteria attached to the marketing function within organisations, but without being able to detect any real changes or major disruptions in the ethical priorities of marketing practice. In other words, the ideological framework within which marketing managers situate their societal contribution has not fundamentally changed. This observation leads us to wonder what happens if the priorities attached to the marketing function are too different from the personal values of the manager?

Deepening ethical concerns through a collective approach between peers, which certainly contributes towards promoting responsible practices, could just as easily be perceived as one more greenwashing operation, especially when the actions put at the forefront are not

always consistent with other activities of the company. For example, in the white paper “Succeed with responsible marketing”, one of the selected marketing actions – the compaction of deodorants by the brands of the Unilever group – leads to a 25% reduction in the carbon footprint, which seems virtuous. However, such action occurs in parallel with other decisions within the same group, such as the continued marketing of deodorants based on aluminium salts whose effects on health are controversial, which are less responsible marketing practices. This complex situation within global or multinational groups reveals a profound inconsistency in the ethical underpinnings of the triple contract that commits a brand (Touzé, 2015), creating a feeling of cognitive dissonance for marketing managers.

The notion of cognitive dissonance that emerges from the reflections of our interviewees calls for the design of a new phase of ethical narrative expansion, applied to food marketing within small companies as well as global ones. This creative narrative could explore a large array of possibilities to reconcile the priorities of brand development with strategic objectives of the company, and to pay attention to the congruence of the values that the marketing manager expresses in his/her practice with the personal values which he/she strives for in life.

Thirdly and finally, Wall’s concept of responsiveness indicates that the possibility of responsible marketing requires the initiating of an actual strategic deliberation with stakeholders, which goes far beyond merely taking them into account. The notion of responsiveness highlights the need for disruption, which incorporates a form of risky endeavour as it conveys the idea that the manager accepts the likelihood of being disturbed in his/her certainties, and of being destabilised by the expectations of the Other. The interactions with our fifteen key informants shed light on three major possibilities to introduce forms of disruption in food marketing practice targeting children. The first, probably the most anticipated by the marketer, comes from the dyadic “child-parent consumer” whose novel expectations linked to organic food or responsible marketing communications need to be deeply understood. The second extends to various actors who speak for civil society and represent the interests of the child, such as investigative media and NGOs (De La Ville, 2014). Finally, the third focuses on the upstream activities in the agricultural chain where marketing managers source the raw materials necessary for the processing or manufacturing of branded products offered to children on the market.

Conclusion

Our research has highlighted the complexities facing marketing managers, whose practice is caught in paradoxical injunctions. Their role is to encourage consumption of products whose effects on consumers might prove harmful in the long run, and also to meet competitive objectives and constantly changing societal expectations. We have shown that ethical decision-making by marketing managers, particularly regarding children, is not an easy task, even when regulated by legislation.

Through a detailed analysis of interactions with marketing managers in the food sector, we have highlighted the different types of arrangements which they make in an attempt to manage this complexity and make responsible or ethical marketing possible. These

arrangements are even more difficult to defend when we introduce the child, a boundary figure of consumers. If marketing managers recognise the vulnerability children as consumers and are prepared to comply with specific regulations designed to protect them, they may just as well be able to take advantage of the agentic child, provided the law does not prohibit it, which could ultimately lead to unethical practices. The figure of the child thus obliges us to re-examine our ethical stance, based on the responsibilities that all adults – whatever our social role as researchers, practitioners, or legislators – have towards the child, to whom we owe protection.

As Wall (2010) states, the concept of ethical, sustainable, or responsible marketing is not static, but must be constantly rethought in the course of action. Applied to our research problem, this assertion means that the marketing practitioner finds himself in the position of having to constantly recreate the situated conditions of possibility for ethical marketing. This theoretical contribution appears to be crucial in the context of the profound upheaval of the myths that underpin societies based on the capitalist model, faced with the limits imposed on growth by the imperative of planetary survival. If there is one sector that is more likely than others to be affected by these unavoidable changes, it is the food industry as well as its marketing techniques, which are being urged to broaden the scope of their responsibility.

In the case of products presenting high health risks in the long run, developing a renewed ethical marketing policy is certainly an actual challenge. Various studies have highlighted the fact that food consumption decisions are subject to judgment biases and that subtle changes in the information context made available to the consumers, such as a simplification of nutritional information on packaging, are likely to guide them towards healthier food choices. However, new ethical questions are raised by the use of manipulative techniques by marketing managers or public authorities to modify consumer behaviour without the latter being aware of it or having given their consent (Askergaard & *al.*, 2014). Therefore, the moral reinterpretation of marketing inevitably raises unprecedented ethical issues, illustrating the fact that developing an ethical stance is a permanent reflective work within a never-ending ethical poetic circle to be understood as an infinite recursive loop.

Whatever the possibilities considered, they always give rise to new ethical issues... We perceive then that it is becoming more and more difficult for marketing managers to conduct a truly responsible (or ethical) practice without calling into question the marketing ideology that pervades the whole system of relations between the company and its stakeholders. Indeed, to the extent that the marketing manager finds himself increasingly prey to the ethical emergences that the organisational marketing function contributes to generating, we wonder whether ethics constitute a blind spot in marketing training. If this is the case, the situations that entail ethical difficulties for the practitioner also become difficult for academics and researchers on the two sides of their professional work. As academics, we have a duty to use our moral imagination to elaborate more sensitive ways to prepare future marketing managers to confront ethical issues that we cannot yet know or imagine. In the end, the figure of the child appears to be a borderline figure who urges us, as researchers, to take a different stance to simultaneously question the ethical underpinnings of marketing, and our own responsibility as researchers (De La Ville & Drevet, 2010). Applied to investigate the ethical underpinnings of marketing to children,

Wall's poetic circle contributes towards opening the black box of moral imagination as defined by Werhane (1999, 2002) and listed as the fourth normative perspective for evaluating and improving marketing ethics (Laczniack & Murphy, 2006).

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