

Necessity of Implementing Advertising Literacy Programs in Preschool Curricula in Debt-Ridden Greece

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ABSTRACT

This research is framed by the principles of liberating education, according to which education is political and members of the community have the opportunity to change themselves through critical consciousness. In this context, we explore childhood consumerism in debt-ridden Greece based on nationwide quantitative research conducted through questionnaires. The sample was 320 parents of kindergarten students attending private and public kindergartens of Greece, stratified by income. According to the results, advertisements affect not only children but also the parents and the family as a whole. The results demonstrate the need and desire of parents that preschoolers develop resistance to marketing techniques. We propose teaching resistance to children and their families by including advertising literacy, a branch of media education, in pre-school education curricula. This implementation will help develop students' critical thinking skills, empower adults, transform society, and reinforce democracy for a fairer childhood.

Keywords: advertising literacy, neoliberalism, preschool curricula, social reconstruction.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Regarding the social environment where children in Greece live, develop, and are shaped as future citizens, we identify the political-economic system of neo-liberal capitalism, which acts on people aiming at specific results through a variety of governance mechanisms. In this regard, the argument is that consumerism is one of the mechanisms to achieve the desired economic objectives, such as profitability and capital accumulation, through marketing and advertising, which psychologically manipulate children as well as parents who are previously submitted in ideal parenting discourses¹ as presented below. In the end, the technologies of the self² adopted by parents through the proposed children's goods consumption are emerging from their fear of being considered inadequate parents and being socially excluded, either themselves or their children.

In the analysis, we adopt a theoretical combination of Marx's and Foucault's positions. Marsden (Marsden, 1999) proposes that Foucault and Marx investigate a common problem, where Marx explains the modes of production of social law and social power in his theory of wage labor while Foucault explains the societal power microphysics. The dialectal interlock of production and consumption is a central idea in Marx's work, and this issue, combined with the impetus of consumption through advertising, is the starting point for this research. On the other hand, Foucault's theory

provides us with valuable tools to analyze modern forms of discipline and bio-power on children and their parents within neo-liberal capitalism. According to M. Foucault (Foucault, 1977), "the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body" (p. 26). Additionally, Foucault revealed the ways in which knowledge and language are used to manage and control the mass and defined truth as a social construction in which knowledge and language are used to justify controlling citizens.

II. THE CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH — GREEK FINANCIAL CRISIS

The Greek crisis, which began in 2008 as a fiscal crisis, soon turned into a public debt crisis and mutated into a recession. The crisis facing Greece is not only economic but also social and multifaceted. Greece still ranks first in unemployment among the 28 EU members (Eurostat, 2019), which results in households without any work, and thousands of unemployed young people looking for work abroad (brain drain). Unfortunately, "the significant increase in flexible work, especially after 2009, failed to increase employment and reduce unemployment in the Greek labor market" (Karamanis & Hyz, 2014, p. 533); on the contrary, it led to huge job insecurity. Based on the most recent Survey of Income and Living Conditions of Households (ELSTAT, 2020), the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion

¹ Discourse is a way of organising knowledge that structures the constitution of social (and progressively global) relations through the collective understanding of the discursive logic and the acceptance of the discourse as social fact (Foucault, 1972:135-140).

² Foucault (1988) defined technologies of the self as techniques adopted by individuals in order to effect by their own means a certain number of operations on their own bodies, minds and lifestyle, aiming to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness and quality of life

amounts to 28.9% of the country's population (3,043,869 people). Due to their physical vulnerability and weakness, children in Greece are the first victims of the current economic crisis, and they are affected first by the reduction of social welfare and support services and second by the escalation of the social crisis. Consequently, children now face a significantly higher risk of poverty and deprivation compared to the total population (Dafermos & Papatheodorou, 2010). Today in Greece, the percentage of children at risk of poverty is 33.3%, ranking third after Romania and Bulgaria (European Court of Auditors, 2020). Although child and adult poverty are two sides of the same coin, as child poverty reflects the poverty of the families to which they belong, the separation between adult and child poverty in public debate leads to a secret distinction between the "unintentional" poor and the "voluntary" poor. This distinction restores the idea of people who do not deserve to be poor (undeserving) and people who deserve it (deserving), as poverty is considered a result of people's own choices (Papanastasiou *et al.*, 2016) according to the neoliberal view. Prolonged recession and austerity measures, combined with reduced social protection spending, have also affected families with children (Papatheodorou, 2014; Petmesidou, 2013).

The largest increase in the percentage of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Europe since 2010 was recorded in Greece (Eurostat, 2016), as more than one in four children in Greece were facing material deprivation in 2015 (25.7%). According to the last UNICEF report for the children in Greece (Papatheodorou & Papanastasiou, 2017) based on the poverty line of 2007, the child poverty rate increased rapidly, from 20.7% in 2009 to 55.1% in 2014 because of the economic crisis. According to the recent measurement of poverty for the EU in 2018, the percentage of children at risk of poverty (ages 0–17) reached 23.4%, 22.1% for adults (ages 18–64), and 18.4% for elderly people (age 65+).

Additionally, children in families with financial difficulties experience more behavioral problems (e.g., antisocial behavior and aggression) and psychological issues (e.g., depression and anxiety) while being less attached to their parents (Neppl *et al.*, 2016). The literature states that the relational and emotional consequences of financial stress make parenting relatively more difficult (Conger *et al.*, 2010). For parents, advertising and the consequent purchase demands of their children create additional difficulties, as limited financial resources are an obstacle to the culture of "continuous shopping and desire". According to Piachaud (Piachaud, 2007), "commercial spending pressures lead to more advertising, more new searches, more pressure on parents and therefore pressure on higher family incomes but also more materialistic attitudes of children and parents" (p. 9). Finally, Buijzen and Valkenburg (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003a) demonstrated a direct correlation between television advertising and materialism in children, misery, and family conflicts.

We assume that in Greece, the current socio-economic situation affects the construction of childhood in a way that hinders children from being active subjects of social processes. Furthermore, within the context of contemporary childrearing, media representations form neoliberal parent-

blaming rhetoric that pushes impoverished parents to be ashamed of themselves for not affording all the products their children demand.

III. NEOLIBERALISM'S RESPONSIBILIZATION

The advent of neoliberalism in the late 20th century brought with it many social, economic, and political shifts that have profoundly affected all peoples' lives. The most characteristic feature of neoliberalism is the systematic use of state power, which is exercised in various anti-democratic policies and practices to impose (economic) market practices, using an internal process repeated internationally through globalization (Nikolakaki, 2011).

Neoliberalism is often understood as an economic principle that relies upon individual freedom, entrepreneurship, and the ability to operate in a free market as a way to advance the wellbeing and prosperity of a society (Soss *et al.*, 2009). The neoliberal ideology offers a new formula for governing, a concept that's often termed "responsibilization," and aims to create self-disciplining and entrepreneurial citizens who are responsible for their own welfare (Cradock, 2007; Davies & Bansel, 2007).

Governmentality in neoliberalism is conducted through the contradictory connection between freedom and control, where personal freedom is a form of self-control and governmentality functions through freedom (Foucault, 1984; Rose, 1989). Furthermore, bio-power is a technology of governance that directly targets the subjects' minds and bodies, a form of power that performs through motivation rather than suppression (Dean, 2009). Individuals are supposed to be accountable for their own well-being by capitalizing on available resources and conducting with professional prescription (Cradock, 2007; Davies & Bansel, 2007). In this system, poor people do not attain sufficiency for themselves and their dependents no matter how hard they work; instead, they are blamed for their condition.

Lemke (Lemke, 2004) indicates that "fear fulfills an important moral function in neo-liberal governments. The constant threat of unemployment and poverty, and anxiety about the future... stimulates a consciousness of economic risks and uncertainties that accompany the... expected entrepreneurship" (p. 49).

A. Parenthood

As children are seen as dependents, notions of neoliberal individualization and responsabilization are imposed on parents who are regarded as responsible for their children's welfare (Hennum, 2014; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). In this regard, the neoliberal ideas in the construction of parenthood reflecting the values of the middle-class significantly influence the way the poor class is problematized and governed. As Qvortrup (Qvortrup, 2008) indicates, childhood has become a period of life in which the sole objective is to train children to become functioning adults. Furthermore, the construction of childhood interlaces with the construction of parenthood, reflecting Ambert's position that "where one sees children, one 'sees' parents. When one sees children who have problems, one looks for parents, especially mothers" (1994, p. 530). The construction of parental responsibility extends the current political model of responsibility,

artificially avoiding the structural causes of parents' difficulties. These policies imply that all parents and all families have the same starting point, concealing the families' socioeconomic backgrounds in political discourse (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014). According to Jensen (Jensen, 2018), in neoliberalism, the attribution of responsibility to parents, and especially to mothers, becomes "a repository for social suffering".

B. Contemporary Notions of Childhood

Regarding childhood, Rose (Rose, 1989) claims that children are the main object of control in society, reflecting the generalized interest of modern states in controlling and regulating the entire population. The way childhood is perceived today is the result of a complex set of overlapping discourses and practices, narrowly related to child governance of children's bodies and minds and implemented through education (Pehtelidis & Stamou, 2017) and consumption.

Modern disciplinary power demands **social consensus** about the legitimacy of its preventive and regulative practices upon children's bodies through its refined and subtle ways of surveillance and control (Jenks, 1996). This explains why the emergence of a child-centered perspective in sociological analysis replaced the idea of childhood as an intermediate stage on the way to adulthood and focuses on a new consideration of childhood as a highly influential phase of life (Alanen, 2001; Ben-Arieh, 2005; Qvortrup, 2008).

C. Education

Social control and regulation are exerted early in people's lives through educational curricula, which are forms of knowledge of a specific subject aiming to the formation of children's everyday lives and experiences. Such knowledge affects social practices and has real consequences for the subjects involved (Olson *et al.*, 2014). Undoubtedly, **neoliberal forms of political and financial power have been partly imposed on the population through the educational system and especially through curricula.**

In this sense, a curriculum is a bio-power technology exerted upon children's bodies. Bio-power, which is closely related to bio-politics, literally means having power over people's bodies and minds as a technology for governing them. In this way, the bio-political system produces subjects who conform to the choices they are given by the system, and the effectiveness of the socio-economic system depends on the bio-political regulation of subjectivity and desire (Dean, 2009).

The late modern discourse of the **competent and autonomous child** emphasizes their competence, active participation in learning, and critical thinking. Although the discourse of the **competent child** creates a new potential for childhood, it promotes, at the same time, new forms of regulation and control, and this shifts the responsibility from adults to children (Pehtelidis & Stamou, 2017).

In early childhood education, "play" produces the "child" as the subject of this discourse. Specifically, play is divided into the "free" and "organized" ones; on this note, even "free play" is represented as a tool for the teachers to gather information and assess the children: while observing children during free play, teachers identify interests, preferences, they testify knowledge and skills [children] have already acquired

and attitudes [children] have adopted (Pehtelidis & Stamou, 2017). In this way, bio-politics produces subjects that meet the requirements of the system. The recent interest in pre-school education brought the institutionalization of two-year compulsory education in Greece for children of ages four to six years old with Article 33 of Law 4521/2018.

D. Consumption

Hardyment (Hardyment, 1998) argues that childhood is nowadays an experience of consuming food, clothes, and entertainment bought with parents' hard-earned cash rather than a matter of learning about and contributing to a busy center of production as it used to be in the past. "Investing in children emotionally can be regarded as the foremost approach to twenty-first-century childhoods, assumed in a range of cultural texts and policy orientated approaches" (Cunningham, 1995, p. 177).

Selling products is an intrinsic part of a capitalist economy. Companies need to advertise to make people aware of expendable goods to expand their sales; however, the question remains: how moral is child-oriented marketing? According to Marxist theory, the development of capitalism forms a social system where consumption is a daily capitalist process that produces and reproduces the consumer subject.

However, in modern times, society does not need mass industrial workers, but it does need to employ its members as consumers and prepare them from birth for this role. As Langer (Langer, 2002, pp. 67–81) notes, in the 21st century, children are redefined as "sacred", and it is because of their purchasing power this time. Contemporary children live in a cultural landscape in which they identify themselves through their ability to consume popular advertised products. Additionally, consumption researchers see children occupying a significant portion of capitalist expansion (Langer, 2002, pp. 67–81). Children's play is fully capitalized, and children are socialized as consumers, as evidenced by the intersection of entertainment and commerce. Subsequently, Middleton *et al.* (Middleton *et al.*, 1994) illustrate the great pressures on low-income parents trying to ensure that their children will not be marginalized. It is clear that toxic childhood is related to consumption, in which television and the Internet introduce children to cognitive and consumption patterns that they must possess to maintain their place in peer groups (Palmer, 2006). Childish content in the media, in addition to the informative message that accompanies the promotion of consumer goods, also conveys a set of social values, desirable role models, and attitudes of the dominant ideology, providing gender and class dichotomies (Williams *et al.*, 2009). At the same time, the presence of television and other electronic media, such as tablets, computers, smartphones, iPods, which have been proven to be particularly fascinating for children, now welcomes the child at home from birth. Consequently, electronic media were considered an important factor in the socialization of the child, which operates in parallel with the family and the school. Moreover, the nature of advertisement is no longer restricted to toys; instead, now it encompasses a wide range of products, and an increasing amount of advertising is being directed at younger age groups.

Many psychologists claim that advertising to preschool children is immoral because of their cognitive immaturity, which makes them more vulnerable to the influence of

advertising as they are unable to understand the world in the same way older children and adults do (Levin & Linn, 2004). At the ages of four and five, children believe commercials are there not only for their entertainment but also as a source of unbiased information about products (Roedder-John, 2002).

E. Impacts of Child Consumerism

Consumerism affects children's physical health. It may be safely assumed that the consumption of crisps, snacks, sugary soft drinks, and junk food is generally promoted by advertisements and leads to increasing childhood obesity. For example, the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity (2012) found that in 2011, fast food, pastry, and cereal ads accounted for about half of all ads seen by children and adolescents (Rudd Center, 2012). Furthermore, mental health may also be affected by commercial pressures. Schor (Schor, 2004) indicates that children engrossed in consumer culture suffered more depression, low-esteem, and anxiety because of their difficulty to keep up with consumer culture, leading to feelings of inadequacy and translating into less confidence in dealing with their peers. Researchers are concerned about advertisers pushing a concept of "how to behave to be acceptable" on children who are so young that they are still trying to develop their own self-identity (Pufall & Unsworth, 2004).

Another worrying consequence of advertising is that it causes intra-family conflict by stimulating desires in children that are then refused by parents, generating resentment in the child and arousing guilt for the parents (Furnham & Gunter, 1998). Additionally, Schor (Schor, 2004) argues that advertisements encourage children to rebel against their parents by creating "adult-free zones" and painting parents as "uncool".

Furthermore, there exists an intense expression of consumerism, called branding. An objective of branding is that the customer justifies paying a certain price due to the emotional resonance that the brand has in their life (Roper & Shah, 2007). As brands determine who we are at home, at school, and in society, researchers indicate that children as young as seven can identify brands that would enhance their street credibility (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). The notion of social distinction agrees with the Bourdieusian theory (Bourdieu, 1984) in which he argues that the struggle for social distinction among people is a fundamental dimension of social life. As brands can be used symbolically to disguise children's backgrounds, Piacentini and Mailer (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004) found that brand names were more desirable to lower socio-economic groups.

Advertisements are exploitative for children and teenagers, as they reproduce gender stereotypes, which harm girls disproportionately. The girls' senses, perspectives, and even future consciousness are predetermined in the context of consumerism (Little & Hoskins, 2004) as they fight to approach an impossible image. Marketing bombards girls with images produced by consumer capitalism so that their internalized model of beauty is based on an illusion (Frost, 2005), and they eventually learn to evaluate themselves as objects valued by appearance. Therefore, media education can be used to produce critically thinking consumers of media content by activating children's cognitive and metacognitive skills so that they can analyze the messages they receive and

challenge stereotypes (Pahlke *et al.*, 2014; Puchner *et al.*, 2015; Wade *et al.*, 2017).

IV. ADVERTISING LITERACY

According to Beck and Purcell (Beck & Purcell, 2010), liberal education provides a process that allows individuals to think, be reflective, find their place in the world, and identify potential areas for change. Our interest in this article is concerned with the hegemonic discourse produced by the media and specifically in advertisements, which reproduce inequalities. We find an opportunity for resistance by utilizing S. Hall's (Hall, 1997) term for an anti-hegemonic reading of advertising messages, the cognitive object of advertising literacy as a means of empowering students.

From a theoretical perspective, literacy is "an umbrella concept that comprises different forms of reading and interpretation. In practice, literacy is the individual's personal ability to understand different kinds of signs and symbolic systems and, on the other hand, the ability to produce different kinds of messages by using these symbolic systems" (Malmelin, 2010, p. 131).

In the case of advertising, it is argued that advertising literacy contributes pedagogically to the recognition of media-symbolic systems by stimulating the ability to reflect on sales and persuasion intentions, and this is achieved through utilizing and analyzing specific attraction techniques such as loud slogans, exciting music, bright colors, offers, etc. The production and dissemination of a model of advertising education are not intended to repel the effects of consumerism on childhood once forever. However, it is offered as a first step that can launch the formation of long-term consciousness, where further resistance skills can be built.

In addition to guiding students in how they read and interpret the encountered texts, advertising literacy as an expression of critical pedagogy aims to illuminate the underlying power structures included in any multimedia text (Garcia *et al.*, 2013). Media education, particularly studies in advertising literacy for preschool students, is a field of study that is constantly gaining ground so that there is no longer doubt about the usefulness and criticality of its insertion in preschool education curricula (Hoek *et al.*, 2020; Naderer *et al.*, 2021). Scholars argue that media literacy programmes operate under three basic assumptions: It (i) creates knowledgeable individuals, (ii) empowers communities, and (iii) encourages democratic participation (Mihailidis *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, Stanley and Lawson (Stanley & Lawson, 2020) provide important information on the impact of media literacy on children's understanding of persuasion in everyday contexts, suggesting that educational intervention enhances students' critical ability as well as their knowledge and ability to evaluate and resist marketing pressure.

V. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This quantitative research was conducted nationwide in autumn 2021, using a structured questionnaire, and the data were collected from 320 preschool students' parents in Greece, stratified by monthly income. Consistent with the bibliography, the research instrument was constructed by the

author to trace the parents' opinions about child consumerism, and it consisted of the following six sections: demographics (9 questions), axis A: "economic crisis and family" (10 questions), axis B: "child and consumerism" (20 questions), axis C: "management of children's purchasing claims" (18 questions), axis D: "intra-family relations" (10 questions), axis E: "empowerment towards advertising" (16 questions). Our research hypothesis is that families face difficulties due to the consumer pressures promoted by advertising; consequently, parents consider that the implementation of advertising literacy in the preschool curriculum is a necessary means of protection against advertising. Therefore, this study aimed to determine whether families suffer from consumer pressures and whether parents consider the implementation of advertising literacy in preschool curricula crucial.

A. Sample

Table I shows the frequencies regarding the demographic and social characteristics of the sample. According to this table, 29 (9.1%) out of 320 participants have graduated primary education, 89 (27.8%) have graduated secondary education, 124 (38.8%) have a bachelor's degree, 46 (14.4%) have a master's degree, and 32 (10.0%) have a PhD. As for gender, the distribution is as follows: 138 (43.1%) men and 182 (56.9%) women. Notably, most of the participants are married (60.0%), 28.1% are divorced, and 11.9% are unmarried. Finally, 70 (21.9%) out of 320 participants report that their monthly income is below 800 euros, 85 (26.6%) 801–1500 euros, 88 (27.5%) 1501–2000 euros, and 77 (24.1%) more than 2000 euros.

TABLE I: SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

		N	N%
Gender	Male	138	43.1%
	Female	182	56.9%
Marital status	Married	192	60.0%
	Divorced	90	28.1%
	Unmarried	38	11.9%
Education level	Primary education	29	9.1%
	Secondary education	89	27.8%
	Bachelor's degree	124	38.8%
	Master's degree	46	14.4%
	PhD	32	10.0%
Monthly income	< 800	70	21.9%
	801–1500	85	26.6%
	1501–2000	88	27.5%
	> 2000	77	24.1%

VI. RESULTS

Participants answer the questions on a case-by-case basis either through a 5-point Likert scale, multiple choices, or open answers.

A. Axis A: "Economic Crisis and Family"

We aim to present the most important results of our research. Participants were asked to express their degree of agreement on some questions related to the consequences of the financial crisis on the family's quality of life using a 5-point Likert scale. According to the results presented in Table II, participants on average moderately agree with the following opinions: **"the financial crisis has damaged our quality of life"** (Mean Score = 3.05; Standard Deviation =

1.577), **"due to the economic crisis, we buy cheaper food"** (M = 3.08; SD = 1.563), and **"due to the financial crisis we have insufficient medical care"** (M = 3.02; SD = 1.557). On the other hand, parents tend to agree with the following statement: **"I find it difficult to change my child's habits, and I prefer to reduce my own needs, rather than my child's"** (M = 3.74; SD = 0.485).

TABLE II: MEAN SCORES (M) AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS (SD) FOR AXIS A

Variables	Mean	SD
The financial crisis has damaged our quality of life.	3.05	1.577
Due to the economic crisis, we buy cheaper food.	3.08	1.563
Due to the financial crisis, we have insufficient medical care	3.02	1.557
I find it difficult to change my child's habits, and I prefer to reduce my own needs, rather than my child's	3.74	0.485
My family has been supported by organizations and solidarity services such as the church, the soup kitchen, or the social grocery.	3.04	1.571

One-way ANOVA analysis revealed that monthly income is a factor that affects the family's quality of life, separating those with an income above 1500 euros from those with an income below 1500 euros, whose living conditions are already disproportionately affected during the financial crisis. Specifically, people with a monthly family income of over 1501 euros tend to disagree with the fact that the financial crisis has damaged their quality of life ($F = 7.022$; Significance. = 0.002) and that due to the financial crisis, they buy cheaper food ($F = 6.902$; Sig. = 0.001) and have insufficient medical care ($F = 7.011$; Sig. = 0.002) as compared to those who have a monthly family income below 1500 euros. In particular, families with monthly incomes below 800 euros have been supported by organizations and solidarity services such as the church, the soup kitchen, or the social grocery (M = 4.45; SD = 0.321).

B. Axis B: "Child and Consumerism"

When participants were asked about how many hours their children spend watching programs (on TV, smartphone, computer, etc.), 3.8% of them answered "not at all", 23.1% answered "30 minutes to 1 hour daily", 40, 3% "1–2 hours", 23.4% "2–3 hours", and 9.4% "3–4 hours". Notably, most parents allow their children to watch childish content for one to two hours daily, while there are very few who do not allow their children to watch programs (Fig. 1).

Furthermore, there is a statistically significant relationship between the variables **"education level"** and **"time of watching programs"**, as according to X^2 Pearson, the control p-value is calculated < 0.05 ($X^2 = 119.871$; Sig. = 0.000). These results indicate that parents' educational levels affect the daily amount of time their children spent on program viewing (on TV, smartphone, computer, etc.). Specifically, it was observed that parents with the highest educational level allow their children to attend programs for less time.

Regarding the influencing tactics used by the children in getting their parents to purchase what they fancied, participants reported that the child expresses the desire (35.0%), demands (27.5%), emotionally manipulates (19.4%), begs (10.0%), and negotiates (8.1%) to influence the parent's purchase decisions (Fig. 2).

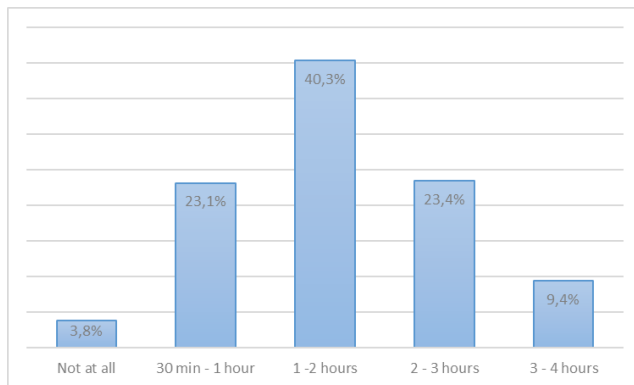


Fig. 1. Time Watching Programs (on TV, Smartphone, Laptop, etc.)

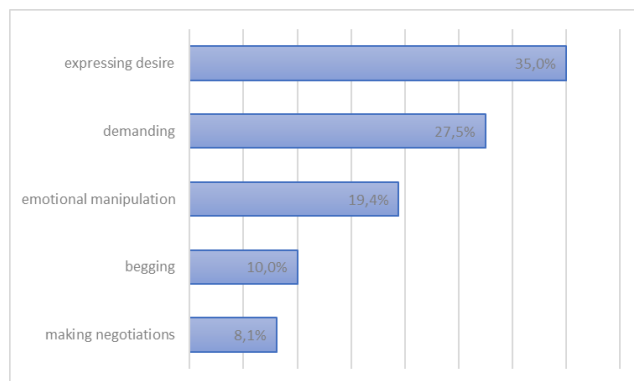


Fig. 2. Influencing Tactics Used by the Children.

A single-factor analysis revealed that the participants' beliefs regarding the reasons why their children desire an advertised product do not differ according to the monthly family income ($p > 0.05$). Moreover, the participants indicate that the reasons their children ask to get an advertised product hierarchically are as follows: a) "for fun", b) "fashion—trend", c) "popularity among the peers", and d) "tempting packaging". On the other hand, participants believe that their children will rarely if ever, request an advertised product based on its usefulness of the product.

C. Axis C: "Management of Children's Purchasing Demands"

Furthermore, there is a statistically significant relationship between the variables "amount of time watching programs" and "purchase demands" ($X^2 = 113.540$; Sig. = 0.000). These results indicate that the daily amount of time a child spends watching programs affects the frequency of the child's purchasing demands. We conclude that the more time children spend watching programs, the more purchasing demands they express. When asked "which is your reaction when you cannot meet a purchase requirement of your child?", the majority of the participants (80.0%) answered that they try to explain the reasons to the child, but they experience distress at the same time, and 20.0% of the participants answered that they feel remorse and guilt. Furthermore, the percentages reported for the whole sample correspond to the percentages in each of the four income categories.

When the participants were asked about their child's reaction when they refuse their purchase request, the majority of the sample (49.1%) answered that the child feels angry, 35.6% answered that the child feels sadness and frustration, and 8.8% reported that the child tries to persuade while only

6.6% of the total sample stated that the child accepts the parents' decision. As observed, the percentages reported for the whole sample correspond to the percentages in each of the four monthly income categories (Fig. 3).

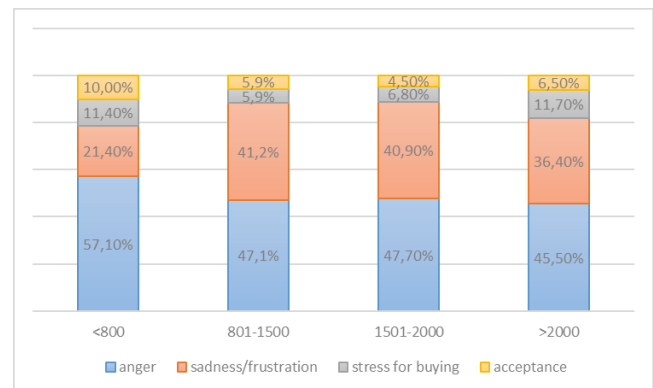


Fig. 3. What Is Your Child's Reaction When You Refuse to Buy the Product He/She Wants?

D. Axis D: "Intra-Family Relations"

According to the participants' answers (Table III), there is a wide agreement with the following statements: "the child's mother tends to accept and comply with purchasing demands more often than the father" ($M = 4.09$; $SD = 0.736$), "refusal of a child's purchasing request usually leads to a quarrel with my child" ($M = 4.11$; $S.D. = 0.741$), "I feel that marketing puts psychological stress on children and parents" ($M = 4.15$; $SD = 0.758$), "the spouses disagree about the decision making and this affects our relationship" ($M = 4.03$; $SD = 0.965$). On the other hand, the sample strongly agrees with the statement "I feel that marketing interferes between me and my child in an unpleasant way" ($M = 4.68$; $SD = 0.522$).

TABLE III: MEAN SCORES (M) AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS (SD) FOR AXIS D

Variables	Mean	SD
The child's mother tends to accept and comply with purchasing demands more often than the father	4.09	0.736
Refusal of a child's purchasing request usually leads to a quarrel with my child	4.11	0.741
I feel that marketing puts psychological stress on children and parents	4.15	0.758
The spouses disagree about the decision making and this affects our relationship	4.03	0.965
I feel that marketing interferes between me and my child in an unpleasant way	4.68	0.522

E. Axis E: "Empowerment Towards Advertising"

Participants were then asked to express their degree of agreement with the statements regarding resistance to marketing techniques. In this regard, the majority of the sample strongly agree that "children's mental health is harmed because of advertisements" ($M = 4.54$; $SD = 0.963$). Participants also disagree that "children can defend against advertising" ($M = 1.98$; $SD = 0.894$). It is also reported that there is a sufficient agreement with the statements: "I consider necessary the implementation of advertising literacy programs on preschool curricula" ($M = 4.15$; $SD = 0.998$) and "I consider crucial the implementation of parents' media training programs" (e.g., consumer seminars) ($M = 4.03$; SD

= 0.985). Finally, participants strongly agree with the following statements: “the protection of the family through legislation that will prohibit children’s manipulation by advertisements is crucial” ($M = 4.89$; $SD = 0.766$) and “I need training and guidance about media issues (news, social messages, advertisements)” ($M = 4.01$; $SD = 0.635$) (Table IV).

TABLE IV: MEAN SCORES (M) AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS (SD)
FOR AXIS E

Variables	Mean	SD
Children’s mental health is harmed because of advertisements	4.54	0.963
Children can defend against advertising	1.98	0.894
I consider necessary the implementation of advertising literacy programs in preschool curricula	4.15	0.998
I consider crucial the implementation of parents’ media training programs (e.g., consumer seminars)	4.03	0.985
The protection of the family through legislation that will prohibit children’s manipulation by advertisements is crucial	4.89	0.766
I need training and guidance about media issues (news, social messages, advertisements)	4.01	0.635

VII. DISCUSSION

The mean scores of axis A: “economic crisis and family” reveal the consequences on the families’ living standards because of the economic crisis, which, according to the research results, disproportionately affects poor families, especially those with a monthly income below 1500 euros. These families reported difficult living conditions in terms of food, medical care, and management of purchasing needs. Indeed, the literature states that in Greece, due to the financial crisis, families with children are deprived of material goods. Indicatively, Bougioukos (2011) shows that children’s nutrition and health are factors that have been affected since 2009. As a consequence of malnutrition, cases of students fainting were reported in some schools in Greece. For the total population, according to Kentikelenis *et al.* (2014), the long recession affected the physical and mental health of Greek people, as well as their access to public health services. Furthermore, in the wider metropolitan area of Athens, there are at least 25 organizations that implement a total of 77 actions to support the poor and homeless (Arapoglou & Gounis, 2015). UNICEF’s report on children’s life during the financial crisis (Papatheodorou & Papanastasiou, 2017) focuses on the nine basic needs that make up the deprivation index for the years 2009 to 2015 in Greece, and it reveals that the biggest deprivation problems faced by households with children involve not only the possession of durable consumer goods but also the payment of fixed bills, the coverage of emergencies, the provision of adequate heating, and the quality utilization of leisure time. The dramatic increase in the inability to meet specific needs from 2009 onwards reveals the extremely difficult situation in which a significant share of families with children in Greece have fallen during the recession and the implementation of austerity policies.

Over time, research has demonstrated that different consumption patterns occur between children and parents due to limited resources in poor families. For the sake of the

children, the personal needs of the parents will be limited, delayed, or oppressed so that the satisfaction of the children’s needs takes precedence within the limited budget of a poor family (Kochuyt, 2004). Additionally, parents with limited resources deprive themselves and prioritize their children’s spending (Hamilton & Catterall, 2006, 2008).

According to the results of axis B: “child and consumerism”, most children spent one to two hours daily watching programs. Furthermore, there is a statistically significant relationship between the variables “**parents’ education level**” and “**time of watching programs**”. Specifically, it was demonstrated that parents with higher educational levels allow their children to watch programs for less time. This finding is consistent with other research showing that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds spend two hours more in front of screens daily compared to children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (3 hours and 48 minutes vs. 1 hour and 52 minutes) (Common Sense Media, 2020).

A single-factor analysis revealed that the participants’ beliefs regarding the reasons why their children desire an advertised product do not differ according to the monthly family income. In this regard, the participants indicate that the reasons that their children ask for an advertised product are hierarchical as follows: a) “for fun”, b) “fashion—trend”, c) “popularity among the peers”, and d) “tempting packaging”. On the other hand, participants believe that their children will rarely if ever, request an advertised product based on the usefulness of the product (Table III). The interesting research by Mertala *et al.* (2016) explored the types of toys preferred by children aged six to eight years and deepens the knowledge of the value of toys not only as playthings but also as cultural objects that children use as a form of expression. The findings show that the reasons on which children base their preferences for toys are multilevel and are based on four overlapping values: functional, material, social, and personal.

Regarding influencing tactics used by the children to get their parents to purchase what they fancied, participants reported that the child expresses desire, demands, emotionally manipulate, begs, and negotiates to influence the parent’s purchase decisions (Fig. 2). Indeed, researchers indicate that younger children just ask, push, negotiate, or use emotional manipulation (Kerrane *et al.*, 2012; Lawlor & Prothero, 2011) while older children with mature cognitive skills use persuasion and negotiation (John, 1999; Palan & Wilkes, 1997).

Furthermore, axis C: “management of children’s purchasing demands” informs us of a statistically significant relationship between the variables “**amount of time watching programs**” and “**purchase demands**”, ($X^2 = 113.540$; Sig. = 0.000). These results indicate that the daily amount of time a child spends watching programs affects the frequency of his or her purchasing demands. Researchers have been particularly concerned about “purchase demands”. Indicatively, six studies agree with our results demonstrating a linear relationship between exposure to advertising and product demand (Atkin, 1975a, 1975b; Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2000; Galst & White, 1976; Isler *et al.*, 1987; Robertson *et al.*, 1989). Recent research reflects parents’ concerns about the consequences of marketing to children, as

empirical evidence has shown that children's exposure to television advertising can indeed lead to materialistic behavior, increased market demands, and parent-child conflict (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2003a).

Moreover, the majority of the sample (80.0%) reported that they try to explain the reasons to their child, but they experience distress at the same time when they cannot meet their child's purchase requirements, and 20.0% of the participants answered that they feel remorse and guilt, which corresponds to percentages in each of the four income categories. Contemporary parents are bombarded with so many consumption choices and opportunities that they feel guilty and anxious about whether they make the right decisions for their children (Lobstein, 2013; Sanders *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, they feel anxious about whether their consumption patterns meet the model of the "good" parent (Nair, 2013; Sidebotham, 2001). It is accepted that a disturbing consequence of advertising is the excessive desires it arouses in children, which are inevitably denied by the parents, creating dissatisfaction for the children and overwhelming guilt for the parents (Gunter & Furnham, 1998).

When asked about their child's reaction when his/her purchase demand is refused, the majority of the sample (49.1%) answered that the child feels angry, and 35.6% answered that the child feels sadness and frustration. According to the literature, in modern marketing, the desire to consume has been transformed into a set of timeless emotional needs possessing almost all children (Linn, 2004). The denial of purchasing demands is perceived by the children as deprivation of their desires as they ignore that these desires are guided by external forces that exploit their ability to "utilize" the purchasing power of their parents (Sidebotham, 2001, p. 480).

Furthermore, the participants' answers for axis D: "intra-family relations" reveal the consumerism-driven behavioral patterns that exist in families. For instance, one of the observed patterns is that the mothers tend to accept and comply with purchasing demands more often than the fathers ($M = 4.09$; $SD = 0.736$), as marketing desires the mothers to be the perfect consumer according to the neoliberal-driven rhetoric, which dictates that "the relationship between mother and child is the most genuine, natural, spontaneous, and exquisite love" (Thurer, 2007, p. 333). Additionally, another reason for this phenomenon is that women are likely to "correlate their self-esteem with the way they raise their children" (Cohen, 1992, p. 73). Another observed pattern in this study is that the refusal of a child's purchasing request usually leads to a quarrel between the parent and the child ($M = 4.11$; $SD = 0.741$), as children become angry and pressure their parents to buy them products such as toys, adopting persuasive strategies such as crying, whining, and demanding (Powell *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, the participants' answers reveal that parents feel that marketing puts psychological stress on children and parents ($M = 4.15$; $SD = 0.758$), and as Doyle-Roche (Doyle-Roche, 2009) indicates, this is because children watch many ads and ask for advertised products, and when they don't get what they want, a family conflict eventually arises. On the other hand, the sample strongly agrees with the statement "I feel that marketing interferes between me and my child in an unpleasant way" ($M = 4.68$;

$SD = 0.522$). Indeed, parents and caregivers are usually the first to address the effects of advertising on children, and their concerns focus primarily on its immoral and misleading nature and its side effects (Bakir & Vitell, 2009; Feldman *et al.*, 1977; Hite & Eck, 1987; Hudson *et al.*, 2008). Finally, spouses disagree about decision-making related to consumption, and this affects their relationship ($M = 4.03$; $SD = 0.965$). In this regard, our research results are in line with the findings of Kaur and Singh (Kaur & Singh, 2005) who report the conflict possibility between spouses as a result of disagreements about the purchase of either temporary or permanent goods, including children's requests.

On the other hand, axis E: "empowerment towards advertising" demonstrates the necessity of implementing advertising literacy programs for children and parents. Participants expressed their agreement with the statement "**children's mental health is harmed because of the advertisements**" ($M = 4.54$; $SD = 0.963$) and their disagreement that "**children can defend against advertising**" ($M = 1.98$; $SD = 0.894$). In this regard, Elliott and Leonard (Elliott & Leonard, 2004) identify some social effects such as bullying and peer pressure as a consequence of branding. According to the literature, consumption pressures eventually lead to low individual well-being (Oral & Thurner, 2019; Richins & Dawson, 1992) and reduced life satisfaction (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). Furthermore, it is essential to note that the child audience is the most vulnerable to advertising campaigns. For this reason, children under the age of eight are considered a high-risk population that is easily misled. Their critical ability has not been fully developed, and they are unable to defend against advertising; thus, once they reach adolescence after being "brainwashed" in this manner, it is difficult for them to have a correct and objective judgment (Nairn & Berthon, 2003). Since early childhood is a crucial developmental stage for building lifelong cognitive skills, advertising literacy is required for children in preschool ages to learn how to process and critique advertising properly (Hudders *et al.*, 2017).

Furthermore, parents consider that it is crucial to implement media training programs for parents (e.g., consumer seminars) ($M = 4.03$; $SD = 0.985$) because they need training and guidance about media issues (news, social messages, advertisements) ($M = 4.01$; $SD = 0.635$). In this regard, Evans *et al.* (Evans *et al.*, 2013) and Cornish (Cornish, 2014) demonstrate that parents do not have the maximum level of knowledge to deal with new forms of advertising. Similarly, Newman and Oates (Newman & Oates, 2014) indicate that non-traditional media such as advergames are not fully recognized by parents as food-marketing channels.

Additionally, it is reported that parents consider that it is necessary to implement advertising literacy programs in preschool curricula ($M = 4.15$; $SD = 0.998$). On this note, recent studies have confirmed the effectiveness of advertising literacy programs in informing children about the purposes of traditional advertising (Gordon *et al.*, 2016; del Mar Pamies *et al.*, 2016). Stanley and Lawson (Stanley & Lawson, 2020) provide important information about the effective impact of daily media literacy courses on children aged 4 to 6 years old. Moreover, previous research also confirms the effectiveness of advertising literacy programs on school children and adolescents (Buijzen, 2007; Hobbs, 2011; Hudders *et al.*,

2017; Kunkel *et al.*, 2004; Livingstone & Helsper, 2006; Nelson, 2016; O'Rourke *et al.*, 2019).

Finally, participants strongly agree that **“the protection of the family through legislation that will prohibit children’s manipulation by advertisements is crucial”** ($M = 4.89$; $SD = 0.766$). In particular, this concern is about the volume of advertising aimed at children, the techniques used in advertising, and the lack of restrictions and sanctions (Blades *et al.*, 2005). Additionally, Ambler (Ambler, 2008) and Nairn and Fine (Nairn & Fine, 2008) suggest that regulations on children-centered advertising should be extended to digital media as research shows that the rules of traditional advertising are not sufficient for embedded forms of advertising, where further restrictions must be imposed (Eagle, 2007; Jain, 2010).

VIII. CONCLUSION

According to the literature presented above, the principles of neoliberalism are based on the development of a capitalist economy, while the overriding reasons for neoliberalism — such as progress, responsibility, and individualism—are inherent in neoliberal educational reform policies.

The Marxist theory illuminates the fact that capitalism forms a social system consisting of producers and consumers where consumption is a daily capitalist process that produces and reproduces the consumer subject as a natural part of life. As a result, modern childhood is inserted in a world of commercial goods and services, as children are consumers from birth through family spending. Kunkel *et al.* (Kunkel *et al.*, 2004) indicate that “there is a significant amount of advertising uniquely designed for and specifically directed at audiences of young children. Such advertising efforts are fundamentally unfair because of young children’s limited comprehension of the nature and purpose of television advertising” (p. 23).

By observing and understanding how commercialization shapes family life and modern childhood, we conclude that social inequalities and exclusion due to consumption are found in most families in Greece, and these families are already affected by the consequences of the economic crisis since 2008. Furthermore, it is essential to note that parents are unable to cope with the marketing coercion in the absence of relevant media policy restrictions. At the same time, the imposition of consumerism creates two parallel worlds in childhood, leading to the exclusion of those who do not conform to it.

Clearly related to the economic crisis, overconsumption and the cultural crisis is the “crisis” of childhood that has already peaked, as television and the Internet initiate children into cognitive patterns and value models about consumer goods they must have to maintain their place in peer groups and society (Palmer, 2006). However, this trend is now entering into a new phase that is characterized by the restriction or inability of consumption and the exclusion from specific consumer products and standards, forming a tension between consumer potential and socially constructed consumer desires. In return, this leads to two forms of childhood; on the one hand, the childhood of “haves” and, on the other hand, the childhood of “have-nots” (Daskalakis, 2015). In Greece, the lowest income groups of the population

are likely to be in a very awful situation because they experience not only extreme poverty but also social exclusion.

It is considered that childhood welfare is not purely a scientific or technical issue; instead, it is mostly a political one (Parton, 2014). In this sense, both education and the imposition of the consumer mechanism through advertising are bio-power technologies exercised on children’s bodies to produce and reproduce the productive subject.

As curricula aim at the behavior and practices of children, intervening and regulating their body and mind through elaborate and discreet forms of control, our interest is concerned with the opportunity of resistance provided by the cognitive object of advertising literacy, which is a branch of education in the media, not only as a means of empowering the individual but also as an opportunity to reshape our society. The results of the existing literature on advertising literacy are considered promising in relation to the development of critical thinking of pre-school students as well as the personal transformation of their parents and extensionally for the evolution of the community.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors do not have any conflict of interest.

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