VULNERABLE CHILDHOOD: AUDIOVISUAL NARRATIVES IN SPANISH SOCIAL ADVERTISING

Jorge Grau Rebollo, *Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain*

ABSTRACT

Social advertising has become a crucial device for a variety of different public and private organizations looking to raise social awareness about socio-cultural vulnerability and possible ways to alleviate it. In Spain, one of the European countries hit hardest by the economic and financial crisis of 2008, the percentage of vulnerable people in the population has grown in the last decade and some groups have become extremely exposed to the sociocultural consequences of vulnerability: particularly children and domestic units with dependent minors.

While previous research has stressed its relevance, the scarcity of studies on this issue in certain contexts– has been also highlighted, especially in non-English-speaking countries. This article attempts to fill that gap by analysing the audiovisual representations of vulnerable childhood contexts that social advertising has generated, using an intentional sample of 32 spots, as well as exploring the theoretical and ideological assumptions that underlie such representations.

From this perspective, I examine the conditioning factors and biases that can lead the social campaigns sponsored by both governmental bodies and non-profit organizations to take on a particular shape. I will also reflect on the treatment of vulnerable groups, who are simultaneously made visible and invisible by such campaigns.

KEYWORDS

social advertising; sociocultural vulnerability; vulnerable childhood; audiovisual representations of vulnerable groups

BIO

Jorge Grau Rebollo is an associate professor at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain). His main research topics are Audio-visual Anthropology and the Anthropology of Kinship. Within the former, he is especially interested in the ethnographic potential of audio-visual sources of representation used to approach, understand and explain reality.

Within the Anthropology of Kinship, he is specialized in new forms of family, the circulation of children, the cross-cultural study of kinship and childrearing organization in vulnerable contexts.

Currently, he co-leads a team of researchers on the cross-cultural study of kinship (getp-GRAFO). He is also co-PI of the funded research project Childrearing, Abandonment and Sociocultural Vulnerability: Situational Analysis and Proposals for Intervention. (VULNERAS).

jordi.grau@uab.cat
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2709-8696

Introduction

Within every society, there are always certain collectives that are simultaneously rendered a visible object and an invisible subject. While the former evokes their material nature, the latter refers to their conceptual condition as a culturally significant phenomenon. This ambivalent and somewhat mutable condition is not shaped solely by sociodemographic parameters but rather fits into the cultural patterns and ideologies that serve as the basis for social and political action. Behind the crucial consequences of national and supra-national policymaking there lie culturally specific assumptions that affect our overall conception of the self and society, from the very definition of what is socially needed to the cultural construction of others.

Hence, while the conception of societies as absolute discrete and homogeneous entities is no longer supported, it is often difficult to refine the multiple implications that social heterogeneity brings to the ideological construction of various forms of 'otherness' at the heart of any given country. Such forms are, more often than not, the consequence of intentional othering processes with certain political and economic triggers. And the forms of otherness on which the media focuses are usually external, non-national collectives.

However, the mere existence of vulnerable populations inside these countries does suggest the existence of an internal 'Other' that frequently becomes the recipient and beneficiary of development projects and material support by governmental bodies, private institutions and Non-Profit Organizations [NPOs] (Donis and Martín 2017). Thus, far from being limited to non-Western countries, this otherness may also be found at the heart of so-called WEIRD – Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (Henrich et al. 2010) – societies, in the form of vulnerable populations.

In this light, previous studies have outlined the lack of research on the connection between economic inequality and media coverage (Grisold and Theine 2017) and the invisibility of children in research on the media, especially those children who are "[…] underserved and marginalized within the broader society" (Jordan and Prendella 2019). This paper tries to address this omission by undertaking a critical and empirical enquiry, informed by a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. It focuses on the role of social advertising campaigns concerning the social welfare of disadvantaged children in Spain, by analysing an intentional sample of relevant TV spots, with the main goal of identifying certain ideological and cultural assumptions about children's sociocultural vulnerability that may not only permeate and shape future public policies, but are sometimes the very consequence of their implementation. The paper also attempts to overcome a supplementary problem faced by studies carried out in Spain: "research from authors in non-native English-speaking countries faces challenges in getting their work published in top-tier (thus more widely disseminated) journals" (Jordan and Prendella 2019).

This research revolves around two central questions: (a) what kind of depictions are used in social advertising about childhood vulnerability in Spain? And (b) what basic theoretical statements and ideological assumptions permeate audiovisual narratives about vulnerable childhood in Spanish social advertising? A couple of secondary questions are also raised: (i) is any agency conferred to vulnerable groups and individuals or do they merely appear as powerless entities? (ii) Given that the relevance of support networks, whether formal or informal, for coping with sociocultural vulnerability when parenting is well known, does social advertising also focus on such sources?

In order to compare the actual social situation with the vulnerability depicted, I combined sociodemographic statistical data with quantitative and qualitative information from an intentional sample of 32 audiovisual campaign spots.

Theory
a) On vulnerability and childhood

Many publications that deal with vulnerability or vulnerable collectives do not provide a precise definition of this concept, relying instead on implicit disciplinary assumptions, given that no standardized definition has been agreed on. Multidisciplinary approaches to defining the concept are even less common (Rothenbühler and Voorpostel 2016). As Perrig-Chiello and colleagues point out:

> Each discipline has its own reasons and methods to conceptualize and benchmark vulnerability, and consequently concepts, measures, and methods differ widely across disciplines. The multidisciplinary

character and use of the term account, however, for the fact that there is little if any consensus with regard to a reliable and coherent conceptualization and operationalization of vulnerability. (Perrig-Chiello et al. 2016: 87).

In a broad sense, vulnerability could be defined as:

> […] an internal risk factor of the subject or system that is exposed to a hazard and corresponds to its intrinsic predisposition to be affected, or to be susceptible to damage. In other words, vulnerability represents the physical, economic, political or social susceptibility or predisposition of a community to damage in the case of a destabilizing phenomenon of natural or anthropogenic origin. (Singh et al. 2014: 71).

Hence, this concept is clearly informed by the ability to manage risk, be the exposition to such risk *ex ante* or *ex post* (Alwang et al. 2001). It also entails the loss of welfare for "[…] those who are more susceptible to economic, physical or psychological harm in or as a result of economic transactions because of characteristics that limit their ability to maximize their utility and well-being" (Smith and Cooper-Martin 1997: 4), regardless of whether they are individuals, families, households or any other social group. Thus, the characteristics of the risk should be taken into account as much as the ability to respond to it when establishing the degree of vulnerability (Alwang et al. 2001).

In addition, vulnerability appears to be a multidimensional phenomenon comprising several factors in various configurations, and, as Morselli et al. (2016: 180) point out, cannot be considered a state but is rather a dynamic process involving possible inflections and back-and-forths. A condition of vulnerability condition may also refer to physical (Allbritton 2014), psychological (Perrig-Chiello et al. 2016) or social (Singh et al. 2014) circumstances, though it is not uncommon to find a closely-connected combination of two or more of these types. However, despite the fact that any kind of vulnerability affects people from a range of social conditions, children are one of the collectives who are most frequently affected (Hirsch 2013; Solé et al. 2020).

Children are clearly vulnerable by nature, given their dependence on nurture and care provided by adults for a much longer period than any other mammal. But their material, physical and mental welfare may be exposed to additional risk in certain social circumstances, such as: structural changes in the family, female-headed households, unemployment, disability, working-age persons' absence or precarious employment, and undesired mobility (Ferriss 2006; Kesler 2015; Misra et al. 2012). Other forms of social exclusion may arise later, during adolescence or puberty, such as school bullying, neighbourhood conflict or negative perceptions of personal well-being (Fernandes-Alcantara 2014; Grané et al. 2019).

In this regard, the role of social networks as sources of material and emotional support has been widely discussed (Bidart and Lavenu 2005; Wellman & Wortley 1990), and there is a large amount of work demonstrating the relevance of formal and, particularly, informal care and support through personal networks for parenting within social vulnerable contexts (Gazso et al. 2016; Maholmes 2014). This social support not only mitigates situations of material deprivation and welfare shortage (Böhnke 2008; Usamah et al. 2014) but also plays an important role in either shrinking or widening social inequality (DiMaggio and Garip 2012). Given the relevance of such support in vulnerable parenting contexts, it would be reasonable to expect it to be reflected in social advertising campaigns.

b) *On media and social advertising*

Social advertising differs from commercial advertising to a similar degree as social communication differs from commercial communication (Pinazo 2003). Taken as social marketing, Adreasen (1994) defined it as: "[…] the adaptation of commercial marketing technologies to programs designed to influence the voluntary behaviour of target audiences to improve their personal welfare and that of the society of which they are a part" (p. 110). More recent definitions consider social advertising to be a:

> […] communicative activity of a persuasive, paid, intentional and self-interested nature which serves, through the advertising media, concrete causes of social interest, and thereby establishes objectives of a non-commercial nature, aiming to [create] effects that contribute to short-term or long-term social and/or human development, and which may or may not form part of change and social awareness programs. (Alvarado 2010: 336).

The ultimate goal of social advertising is to present audiences with relevant information so as to shape their opinion and mobilize them towards transforming social behaviour models (Khanova et al. 2017: 1285). It therefore seeks to improve individual situations as much as to promote social responsibility by appealing to moral values (Popkova et al.: 2018).

Children being considered one of the most fragile links in the social chain, they are often present in social advertising campaigns. In the Spanish case, this representation ranges from 30%, for civil society organization adverts, to 60% in adverts sponsored by international organizations (Donis and Martín, 2017: 421). However, while many studies have looked at the risk to which children are exposed when involved in general advertising in potentially pernicious ways – e.g. through sexualized depictions (Méndiz: 2018) – at an institutional level, there is a lack of research on social advertising. Some exceptions may be found: the government of the Autonomous Community of Madrid, for example, has warned against the lack of respect for children's right to dignity, privacy and a positive self-image (Canalda: 2011) in advertising, though there was no specific mention of their representation in social advertising. The Catalan Audiovisual Council (CAC), an independent authority that regulates audiovisual communication in Catalonia, has also recently published guidelines on the representation of children in the media, paying particular attention to those in a special situation of vulnerability, due to their status as fostered children (Consell Audiovisual de Catalunya 2019). Again, social advertising was not within the scope of these guidelines.

The situations represented in the media and advertising, including social campaigns, also result in the construction of a social imaginary of vulnerability. A negative underlying connotation of vulnerability can sometimes be noted, which leads to the representation of vulnerable subjects as victims, denying them the capacity to be potential agents for change (Echeverría 2014). In this light, given the importance of fundraising among NPOs, some empirical research has shown that negatively-framed messages become more efficient than positively-framed ones, as far as charitable messages are concerned, because: "[…] negative images increase persuasive appeals in promoting charitable appeals [*sic*]" (Chang and Lee 2009: 2927-2928).

Such media representations commonly entail negative conceptions about both vulnerability in general and vulnerable subjects in particular, especially when poverty is at the root of the condition - with allusions to laziness, crime, deviousness, etc.- (Chauhan and Foster 2014; Clawson and Trice 2000). At an international level, the influence that these emotional strategies have had the First World's image of the Third World reveals dependent correlations and NGOs/NPOs do often use such asymmetry to gain support, by alluding to concepts of duty and guilt (Donis and Martín 2017: 418). This may lead us to consider whether such a representational trope is replicated when it comes to vulnerability within WEIRD societies such as Spain.1

Chauhan and Foster (2014) confirm that the British press tend to represent poverty as a social phenomenon linked to the groups considered most vulnerable, such as children and the elderly, and conclude that there is "[…] an implicit tendency to distance poverty from general society and portray it as a problematic Other" (pp. 400-401). They posit that this othering process sometimes operates through representational absence and denial, sometimes through representations of difference and at times, even through representations of a threat associated with socially undesirable activities (*ibidem*). Conversely, the othering of vulnerable collectives may also take place by overrepresentation. Clawson and Trice (2000) showed how, while the black population made up less than one-third of the poor in the U.S. "[…] the media would lead citizens to believe that two out of every three poor people are black" (p. 54).

---

1 The Spanish economy is the thirteenth largest in the world. In the post-Brexit context, Spain ranks as the fourth largest economy in the Eurozone (Silver, 2020).

Hence, some empirical studies in Germany have shown a positive correlation between the rise of inequality and increased coverage in the media, "yet the mere increase of coverage tells little about the way inequality is mediated" (Grisold and Theine 2017: 4274). However, previous research shows that humanitarian crises that enter the media spotlight only stay there for a limited time (Mutter 2008) and, despite the fact that most of this literature does not focus specifically on social advertising, it is crucial to reflect on the influence of this under / overrepresentation on symbolic power and practical policy-making decisions. This is clearly a field where the media plays a crucial role, by defining problematic social issues and legitimating certain solutions (Barnett et al. 2007).

Materials and methods

This research draws on a combination of (a) bibliographical sources, (b) statistical sociodemographic data, (c) statistical advertising data, and (d) an audiovisual repertoire of 32 spots from social advertising campaigns.

Bibliographical sources provide the theoretical framework for the research, including significant contributions from previous studies. The statistical sociodemographic data offers a quantitative snapshot of Spanish society both at a macro (aggregate data) and micro (area, gender or age groups) level. The advertising sources provide valuable information, such as the main broadcasting media and the distribution of different kinds of advertising over time and between different TV stations and target audiences. This quantitative approach was completed by coding the selected repertoire of adverts according to several variables related to: the advertising category, the advert's main purposes, the kind of vulnerability displayed, and the characters, interactional context and kinds of social relationships depicted, as well as other variables. This coding process was completed in parallel to the collection of qualitative information, focused on dialogues and situations.

On vulnerability and vulnerable children

In 2016, 26.9% of the population living in Spain and nearly one in three children (32.9%) were at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion (Llano 2017: 53). According to the Spanish Statistical Office (www.ine.es), the AROPE (at risk of poverty or social exclusion) rate that year showed that 53.3% of single-parent households with at least one dependent child were in that category, while only 24.7% of single-person households were in the same situation. The difference between bi-parental households with dependent children and two-person households without offspring was nearly six percentage points (28.1% - 21.5%). This gap grew to 13.3 percentage points when considering other types of household with (38.3%) or without (25%) dependent children.

Despite the fact that households with dependent children are at significantly greater risk of relative poverty in both Spain and the EU-28, these percentages are notably higher in Spain (Figure 1). The difference can also be seen within age groups, especially in the population aged under 16 (Table 1).
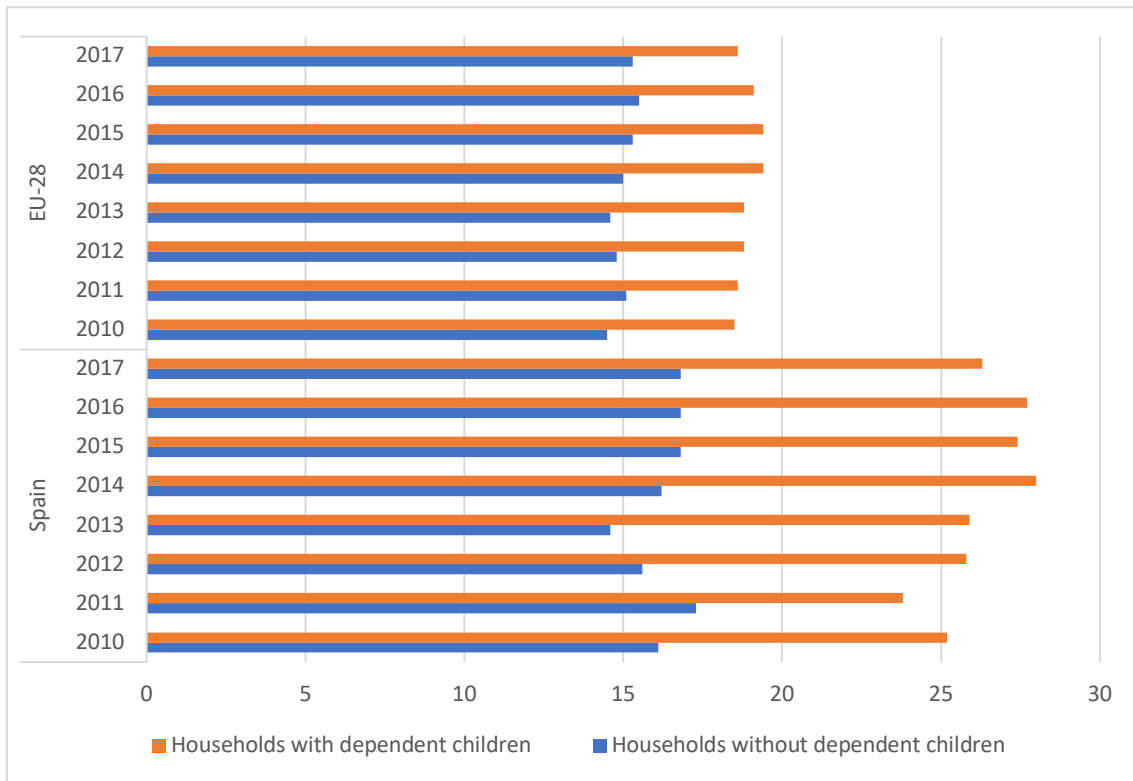
FIGURE 1. The population at risk of relative poverty by household type and time period: Spain and EU-28. Source: author's own figure using INE data (www.ine.es).

			Under 16 years old	From 16 to 29 years old	From 30 to 44 years old	From 45 to 64 years old	65 and over
Spain	2010						
		Female	33.5	29.1	24.2	24.9	24.9
		Male	31.7	26.4	25.6	23.4	20.2
	2011						
		Female	32.9	32.0	26.2	25.7	22.9
		Male	30.4	28.8	25.8	25.8	18.9
	2012						
		Female	32.0	33.9	28.0	27.4	16.8
		Male	30.9	33.2	28.0	27.0	16.1
	2013						
		Female	30.4	32.2	27.5	29.3	15.0
		Male	33.4	33.9	28.6	28.5	13.8
	2014						
		Female	35.3	36.0	30.2	31.3	14.0
		Male	35.4	36.8	30.5	30.7	11.4

			Under 16 years old	From 16 to 29 years old	From 30 to 44 years old	From 45 to 64 years old	65 and over
	2015						
		Female	32.9	37.2	28.3	31.1	14.8
		Male	34.0	39.1	28.7	30.8	12.2
	2016						
		Female	31.0	38.1	27.4	31.1	14.9
		Male	32.3	37.1	26.7	29.9	13.8
	2017						
		Female	31.5	36.5	25.5	28.6	17.8
		Male	30.6	33.2	24.6	27.5	14.5
	2018						
		Female	29.9	37.2	25.5	27.8	18.7
		Male	27.7	30.5	23.3	27.5	16.3
UE-28	2010						
		Female	27.4	30.5	22.4	26.0	22.9
		Male	27.2	28.5	21.6	21.9	16.5
	2011						
		Female	27.3	31.2	23.2	26.8	23.2
		Male	26.8	28.4	22.4	23.2	16.9
	2012						
		Female	28.0	32.3	24.3	27.4	21.5
		Male	27.6	30.4	23.2	23.8	16.2
	2013						
		Female	27.4	32.4	24.2	27.6	20.5
		Male	27.6	31.0	23.2	24.2	15.2
	2014						
		Female	27.4	32.4	24.3	26.7	20.2
		Male	27.5	30.7	23.4	24.1	14.6
	2015						
		Female	27.1	31.2	23.3	26.1	19.6
		Male	26.4	30.7	22.7	23.8	14.6
	2016						
		Female	26.3	31.5	23.2	25.5	20.6
		Male	25.6	29.5	22.3	23.0	15.0
	2017						
		Female	26.3	31.5	23.2	25.5	20.6

		Under 16 years old	From 16 to 29 years old	From 30 to 44 years old	From 45 to 64 years old	65 and over
	Male	24.4	28.0	20.8	22.5	15.2
2018						
	Female	:	:	:	:	:
	Male	:	:	:	:	:

TABLE 1. The population at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Europe 2020 strategy) by age group and time period in the EU (per cent).
Source: author's own table using INE data.

On social advertising

Infoadex, a leading company in terms of advertising market share and investment in Spain, reported a total of 12,835.5 million euros of investment in advertising in Spain during 2018, rising to 13,145.6 million euros the next year: equivalent to 1.06% of Spanish GDP (2020: 6). While digital advertising has now overtaken television and currently ranks first in total investment volume (*idem*), for most of the period examined, TV was the main asset. If we consider the number of advertising insertions (spots) and insertion time (minutes), the 2009 to 2019 time series for public and private services advertising shows that charities have the greatest presence on TV in this sector (Table 2).

		Charities	Business	Professional associations	Foundations	Corporations / associations line	Other corporations & associations	Political parties & trade unions
2009	**Spots**	69.70%	1.90%	2.30%	11.10%	0.00%	12.10%	2.90%
	Minutes	72.40%	1.30%	1.50%	9.60%	0.00%	12.30%	2.80%
2010	**Spots**	59.00%	13.00%	2.00%	14.00%	0.00%	12.00%	1.00%
	Minutes	61.00%	7.00%	1.00%	17.00%	0.00%	13.00%	1.00%
2011	**Spots**	37.80%	4.50%	0.70%	23.10%	0.00%	10.20%	23.60%
	Minutes	36.50%	2.30%	0.60%	23.90%	0.00%	10.20%	26.60%
2012	**Spots**	65.00%	8.00%	0.00%	20.00%	1.00%	5.00%	2.00%
	Minutes	70.00%	4.00%	0.00%	19.00%	1.00%	5.00%	3.00%
2013	**Spots**	61.00%	6.00%	1.00%	21.00%	1.00%	10.00%	:
	Minutes	65.00%	4.00%	0.00%	21.00%	1.00%	8.00%	:
2014	**Spots**	62.00%	1.00%	0.00%	16.00%	0.00%	12.00%	8.00%
	Minutes	71.00%	0.00%	0.00%	13.00%	0.00%	9.00%	7.00%
2015	**Spots**	64.50%	0.80%	0.60%	11.70%	0.40%	10.50%	11.50%

		Charities	Business	Professional associations	Foundations	Corporations / associations line	Other corporations & associations	Political parties & trade unions
	Minutes	73.10%	0.30%	0.40%	9.60%	0.30%	6.10%	10.20%
2016	Spots	73.00%	0.30%	0.60%	11.10%	0.60%	9.80%	4.60%
	Minutes	81.60%	0.10%	0.40%	7.70%	0.20%	5.80%	4.20%
2017	Spots	72.40%	0.10%	0.50%	10.10%	2.90%	13.60%	0.40%
	Minutes	79.80%	0.00%	0.40%	8.00%	1.00%	10.40%	0.40%
2018	Spots	74.70%	0.30%	1.10%	11.30%	1.60%	10.60%	0.50%
	Minutes	82.50%	0.20%	0.90%	7.70%	0.60%	7.60%	0.40%
2019	Spots	66.60%	0.40%	0.20%	13.20%	0.30%	10.20%	9.10%
	Minutes	71.50%	0.50%	0.10%	10.90%	0.30%	6.60%	10.00%

TABLE 2. Spots and minutes sponsored by corporations, organizations and associations in the public and private services advertising sector (per cent).
Source: Kantar Media (https://www.kantarmedia.com/es).

A large proportion of social advertising deals with international cooperation and external actions aimed at non-national populations residing in foreign countries. As the intention of this study is to analyse audiovisual representations of the internal Spanish population, the sample was produced through an intentional selection process, based on the following requirements:

- Audiovisual units must have been broadcast on television.
- They should focus on children presented as being in a vulnerable condition.
- They must not deal with foreign collectives (e.g. refugees or foreign unaccompanied minors).
- They must be sponsored by public bodies, non-profit, third-sector organizations or private foundations with a social purpose.
- Spots within the sample must have been screened between 2014 and 2020.

Once these criteria were set, the first research stage consisted of: (a) a search of the list of 2056 NPOs/NGOs registered in Spain in 2018, in order to identify those which meet the aforementioned criteria; (b) retrieving audiovisual units from organizations' websites and channels on open-access internet platforms; and (c) screening all audiovisual units and making an initial selection of those that meet the sampling criteria.

In the second stage, a definitive sample was reached, of 32 spots from 10 different institutions or NPOS-NGOS (Table 3). Each of these units was then screened several times, in order to proceed to the quantitative and qualitative coding.

	Sponsor	Spots
NPOs/NGOS	Aldeas Infantiles SOS	1
	Ayuda en Acción	5
	European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN)	1
	EDUCO	5
	Fundación Balia	1
	Save the Children	6
	UNICEF	1
Private Foundations	Fundación Obra Social La Caixa	8
Government (Regional/General)	Generalitat de Catalunya (012)	1
	Gobierno de España	3
TOTAL		32

TABLE 3. Selected Campaigns (Sample, n=32).
Source: author's own table.

Results
Depictions of vulnerability and vulnerable children in social advertising

20 units in the sample (62.5%) are sponsored by NPOs/NGOs, 8 (25%) by a private foundation (linked to a major financial institution) and 4 (12.5%) by the Catalan regional government or the Spanish national government.

Nearly all units (94%) refer specifically to vulnerability due to sociocultural factors, only two of them referring to other forms of exposure to risk (psychological and medical risk). The main individual issues addressed are: a shortage of food (33.3%), lack of education or unequal access to schooling (16.7%), housing problems (10%) and physical abuse (6.7%). Issues involving multiple factors are shown in the other 33.3%, which refer to economic poverty, low incomes and the inability to meet financial needs; the digital divide and inequality of access to new technologies.

As far as the 135 advertising characters in the sample are concerned (Table 4), women were more frequently portrayed than men (48.9% versus 37%), gender being difficult to determine in the other 14.1% (either because the characters are babies or toddlers with no evident gender attribution, or because the characters are shown in situations where it is not possible to clearly see their whole body). Nearly half (45.2%) of all the characters are children, and female children are the most frequently depicted characters (24.4%), closely followed by male children (20.7%). After children, adult women (19.2%) and adult males (8.9%) are the most commonly portrayed characters. If we look at the correlation between gender and the type of role (Table 4), women play the central roles more frequently than men (26.7% versus 18%), and when it comes to the context in which interactions take place, 62% of characters are shown in indoor spaces (at home, at work, within schools, etc.) and 31.8% in outdoor settings (playgrounds, streets, parks, etc.). 14.7% of the characters are located in specific home spaces, another 14.7% in schools or libraries and 11% in parks or playgrounds. Adult individuals are mostly placed in indoor spaces (80% of women and 91% of men), though only 12% of women are overtly associated with workplaces or educational centres in the spots. Similarly, only 9.1% of adult males are presented within home settings, and none of them are overtly presented in the workplace in the selected

sample. Children are portrayed in different settings in almost equal proportions, regardless of their apparent gender.

		Central role	Supporting character	Extra	Other	TOTAL
FEMALE						
	Elderly	1	0	0	0	**1**
	Adult	14	1	9	2	**26**
	Teenager	5	0	1	0	**6**
	Child	16	2	15	0	**33**
MALE						
	Elderly	1	0	2	1	**4**
	Adult	4	0	8	0	**12**
	Young Adult	1	0	0	0	**1**
	Teenager	3	0	1	0	**4**
	Child	15	2	11	0	**28**
	Baby	1	0	0	0	**1**
N/A		2	2	15	0	**19**
TOTAL		**63**	**7**	**62**	**3**	**135**

TABLE 4. Distribution of characters by gender, age and role.
Source: author's own table.

Basic statements and assumptions detected in audiovisual narratives on vulnerable childhood

When we consider audiovisual narratives on childhood vulnerability in the selected spots, underlying cultural assumptions relating to a series of major topics can be detected. These topics may be grouped into the following categories:

The social role of the family: the family is portrayed as the primary relational space in 43.7% of the sample units. This does not mean that another social institution takes on the family's functions in the other spots, but simply that they take place in a different social setting and do not focus on this issue. In this light, 53% of the context interaction in these adverts takes place at home. Hence, there is a clear association between family and home in contexts of social vulnerability, particularly when children are involved. For example, one piece from Aldeas Infantiles SOS explicitly claims that "the best thing for a child is to have someone who loves him" (the Spanish generic masculine is used in the spot) and then adds that "more children than you think grow up without their parents' support". Other spots present situations where the family environment is implicit, as in advertising promoting meal grants and other financial aid for children whose nutritional needs may not be properly provided for at home. Within these contexts, families are not verbally blamed for this shortage, and support is solicited by explicitly calling on the audience to fulfil children's needs or provide them with happiness. However, as shown in the EDUCO campaign, with its "for many families, poverty is just another neighbour" tag line, not receiving blame does not mean that people do not feel embarrassed by their

precarity, though this sentiment is mostly deduced by the look and body language of the characters: visible in their gazes, lowered heads and body language conveying contrition (Image 1).

IMAGE 1. *La pobreza es un vecino más* [Poverty is another neighbour] campaign, EDUCO.
Courtesy of EDUCO (www.educo.org).

These material shortages are primarily covered by other family members, such as grandparents, in the adverts (Image 2). In that sense, governmental-sponsored spots include greater phenotypical and functional diversity in children, even when the explicit message also refers to the suitability of the family as primary care provider. In the event that children can no longer cohabit with their family, a foster family is shown to be the preferred subsidiary space (Image 3). By the same token, campaigns on the prevention of violence and abuse also stress the importance of a caring family environment.

IMAGE 2. *Abuelos solidarios* [supportive grandparents]. EDUCO.
Courtesy of EDUCO (www.educo.org).

IMAGE 3. Foster family campaign, Spanish Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality (2017).
Source: available for download at: http://www.sebuscanfamilias.es/descargas/carteles.htm.

Single-parent families are those which are most structurally exposed to social vulnerability, especially mother-headed households. Both men and women are shown to be care providers, but caring responsibilities sometimes fall implicitly on women, by considering only female babysitters, for example, as in the aforementioned spot from Aldeas Infantiles SOS (whose spot used the Spanish feminine form instead of a more gender-neutral expression). Similarly, of the few grandparents represented in the selected sample, women are more directly linked to physical care and daily tasks in the home (such as cooking and feeding), while grandfathers play with children in the playground. Men are depicted in explicit caring activities (situations in which male characters visibly perform parental tasks related to physical care: feeding, taking the child to the playground, playing and watching him or her, and reading a story at bedtime before tucking the child in) in five spots in the sample (15.6%).

The main cause of vulnerability. As stated above, a lack of food is the most common issue, followed by the consequences of unequal access to education, housing problems and physical abuse. Each of these issues reveal an economic background that is made apparent in different ways, according to the specific purpose of each spot. Poverty is made more or less explicit in 16 spots (50%). Sometimes, as in some spots from the Ayuda en Acción NGO, children are explicitly considered to be "candidates for poverty"[2], while certain campaigns run by EDUCO and the BALIA Foundation emphasize how poverty prevents children from achieving equal opportunities through education.

Governmental campaigns in this sample opt to present the wider consequences of poverty during childhood, creating different emotional and practical obstacles to engaging in a range of future life activities. For instance, the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) spot shows poverty as a structural determinant of life as a whole: the sooner it begins, the longer it constrains a child's future expectations for a better life.

Closely connected to this is the fact that family, as the primary site for socialization, is especially affected by poverty, particularly in contexts where the dual-income model does not work. Save the Children focuses on single-parent households as particularly vulnerable environments for children and the selected narrative pinpoints some specific consequences of this situation. While the video shows details of a bookshelf, the voiceover narrated by a child tells the audience: "I find it difficult to read because the letters look blurry to me. Mummy says she'll buy me some glasses as soon as she can... Maybe next month". At that point, text appears over the image saying: "More than 20% of children of single mothers who need to wear glasses cannot afford them". Shortly afterwards, more text appears over the video, stating that "75% of the children of unemployed single mothers are in poverty".

Other triggers of vulnerability, such as violence, harassment and abuse, are less common in the sample. Of the references that are made, 50% appear in spots sponsored by a Spanish ministry, within specific campaigns about children growing up in contexts of violence, whether physical (as in Save the Children's "#LosÚltimos100" [#TheLast100] campaign) or of a more symbolic nature (some campaigns emphasizing the enduring psychological imprint left by violence).

One last source of vulnerability refers to risk to privacy posed by the internet and social networks, but this does not specifically link to poverty. The UNICEF campaign that addresses this risk takes children and teenagers as examples of how much information one may provide to unknown users, other than friends and other contacts in social networking relationships. In this case, the damage is presented in terms of the potential risks to privacy and the possible future consequences of the dissemination and misuse of such information.

---

2 The tag line is a play on words, alluding to the political candidates whom viewers are asked to pressure by signing a petition at the end of the spot.

Sources of support. Vulnerability is generally presented as a problem that it requires a collective effort to overcome. Adverts in the sample reference both formal and informal channels as key means for coping with it. Formal support comes from institutional aid, and mainly refers to the action of sponsors in structuring funding or material contributions to aid programmes, such as fundraising, food collections or regular donations. Formal support is also provided at an institutional level, by regional or general governments that delegate particular tasks to secondary institutions such as families. Hence, when vulnerable children find themselves outside of a family, usually when they have been institutionalized in extreme situations, government bodies search for foster families in an attempt to alleviate such a condition by providing the nearest equivalent available.

Volunteerism is often represented as part of an institutional coping strategy. Far from being a spontaneous action undertaken by particular individuals, the call for volunteers is a collective enterprise that is channelled by central agencies (mainly NGOs and NPOs) to enlarge the supporter base, on one hand, and to sustain campaigns over a certain time period, on the other. Twelve spots in the sample (37.5%) explicitly call the audience to join the institution, give donations or become actively involved in other ways (e.g. by downloading items to make a material or economic contribution).

In contrast, informal support is almost absent in the examined sources: only one piece (3.1%) shows the relevance of this kind of assistance. It is a spot from EDUCO where a female neighbour gives a sandwich to a girl who is going to the playground with her father, as now he has plenty of time ("we're going to spend the summer playing [...] since daddy doesn't have a job anymore, he has a lot of holidays" says dad to a smiling woman). She smiles at the girl and says: "Great! But I'm sure you've forgotten your lunch" while handing her a snack. After some seconds in silence, an embarrassed father looks at the woman and says a laconic "thank you", whereas she nods in silence. However, the seeming underrepresentation of informal support in the sample does not mean that it has no practical relevance, nor that there is a preference for formal channels. Rather, it is quite likely the consequence of an inherent bias in social advertising, given that every spot is the consequence of the intentional purpose not of individuals, but of the foundations, institutions and other kinds of non-profit organizations that finance them.

The active agency of families and children. In the media, popular opinion and a not insignificant proportion of academic research, vulnerable groups are considered defenceless and essentially passive, as they lack the capacity to actively overcome their adverse situations. However, while some research has contested the reproduction of victimizing discourses that withdraw any capacity for transformation from the actors in question (Echeverría, 2014), social advertising does not seem to fully restore such a transformative ability to the people it portrays, despite avoiding excessively negative depictions.

Nonetheless, a couple of examples show that children may be considered somewhat exceptional in this regard. In the first spot, Save the Children asks some children what they thought to be major problems in their autonomous community (Andalusia) and how they would act to change them (poverty, violence, etc.). This campaign (#LegislaturaDeLaInfancia [#Children'sLegislature]) does not consider children to be mere passive receptors, but rather turns them into subjects with the capacity to critically reflect on major social concerns.

The second example (UNICEF @NoSeasEstrella [#Don'tBecomeaStar]) also focuses on children and teenagers and their ability to control certain aspects of their lives, such as the kind of private information they are willing to share. Despite the fact that these young people are not able to manage information channels, their decision-making ability and critical judgement are highlighted.

However, beyond those two specific cases, characters depicted as vulnerable are seen more as recipients of aid than active agents of positive change. Only one spot (EAPN's campaign) overtly alludes to the blaming and shaming of vulnerable people through a voiceover in which several different voices label them as the deserving poor and sometimes come close to calling them scroungers that drain welfare funds (as also by Chauhan & Foster, 2014: 398). But the ultimate intention of that spot is to fight stigma and victimization by exposing how the poor are intentionally made invisible, and the multiple negative consequences that this kind of punitive moralism has in the present and future for real people, rather than mere stereotypes.

Discussion

Vulnerable children are keenly present within social advertising in Spain: one of the top five post-Brexit Eurozone economies, where poverty and sociocultural vulnerability have hit some social sectors hard, making them the most visible 'others' within national borders (Donis and Martín 2017). Thus, single parent families, households with dependent children and the young population are the collectives that have suffered most and are widely depicted as particularly vulnerable groups. Against this background, regional and national government bodies, non-profit and non-governmental organizations, as well as social foundations of major financial institutions have turned to social advertising as a crucial strategy for fighting vulnerability, both by raising public awareness of the issue and by mobilizing individual and collective assets to alleviate the problem. In fact, charities are the organizations with the greatest presence in Spanish TV advertising over the last decade.

However, far from being merely instrumental devices, social advertising campaigns shape conceptual constructions of vulnerability and embody precise audiovisual narratives, based on certain cultural statements and ideological assumptions about vulnerability, care and support. Hence, by analysing their audiovisual outcomes, researchers can better delineate mainstream narratives on major social problems, as well as specific strategies for presenting and coping with those issues.

Despite the fact that academic studies show vulnerability to be a multidimensional phenomenon (Morselli et al. 2016), particular spots have to address specific target audiences, so they base their message on specific concerns. This may lead to the overrepresentation of single-cause problems, seemingly erasing multidimensional perspectives. Thus, single-topic ads may be the consequence of the thematic nature of sponsored campaigns, rather than an oversimplification of the concurrent causes of socio-cultural vulnerability.

All in all, audiovisual depictions of vulnerable children confirm that poverty is the major common denominator for different situations of vulnerability (Chauhan and Foster 2014). Furthermore, far from being shown as an isolated issue, current conditions of economic and material shortage are considered as frequently as the material and emotional imprint such situations will leave upon the future. Another common topic raised through analysis of the selected sample is gender issues. This analysis showed a noticeable difference among adult women and adult men in social advertising depicting vulnerable offspring. This demonstrates the cultural predominance of women as the main caregivers with responsibility for child welfare, although the treatment of gender seems to be more carefully balanced in governmental advertising, where spots appear to pay more attention to depicting spaces and tasks in an egalitarian manner.

While academic sources show that women tend to be more associated with the home and men are more often regarded as the main breadwinners, the intentional tone of social advertising may tend to balance these gender tropes, although this intention should be explored

further in future studies. It is interesting to note the relevance of gender morphemes in languages like Spanish, in which there are distinct male and female forms, as using a gendered term instead of a more gender-neutral one may introduce important ideological nuances. However, gender seems to make no significant difference among children, which is the only age category that is present in nearly all settings.

Other basic theoretical and ideological statements clearly permeate such portrayals. Family is overtly shown to be the main social setting in which relationships are developed and care is provided in most cases, while parents are usually the primary caretakers. Grandparents play an implicit role as secondary custodians. When biological parents cannot take care of their offspring, the foster family is portrayed as the best subsidiary option.

If we consider the sources of available help depicted, the infrequency with which informal support is included as a coping strategy in the adverts is surprising, given its relevance in real life (Gazso et al. 2016). Once again, this is probably due to the bias induced by the very nature of such campaigns: if the institution sponsoring the campaign is seeking to channel the active involvement of the audience, such support may be considered formal. The activity and efficiency of informal personal networks does not fit with the intention of social advertising. However, interpersonal solidarity is sometimes shown and, in such cases, is seems that someone anticipating your need and providing aid may result in a less embarrassing situation than receiving a donation from a charity or more explicit assistance. As the example of the neighbour offering a snack in the EDUCO spot may show, solidarity among closely-connected individuals in the form of a favour may make beneficiaries feel less uncomfortable than receiving other more explicit handouts. Generally speaking, the social advertising examined avoids punitive moralist discourses and makes very limited use of negative images, although the emotional appeal is not absent. This supports Chang and Lee (2009) observations on the persuasive power of negative messages (understood here as commiserative ones), while introducing a nuance, by which overly negative, straightforward visual depictions of vulnerable subjects are (seen as) less effective.

This research also confirms Echeverria's (2014) observations on the lack of agency of those who are designated victims: vulnerable children and families are given very little capacity for active transformation. Social advertising makes it plain that vulnerable people need help, and it contributes to providing such aid but, as in its underrepresentation of informal networks, the social agency of such collectives is seldom portrayed.

Although this study goes some way to address the lack of research in this area from non-English-speaking countries (Jordan and Prendella 2019), it has several limitations. Firstly, it focuses mainly on audiovisual outcomes, so other relevant perspectives (production, distribution and reception) cannot be addressed. Multimodal approaches may be useful for future research, in order to cover other stages in the social advertising production process. Secondly, similar social advertising from different countries should be included in future studies, in order to get a broader picture of this activity from a cross-cultural point of view. Thirdly, other types of media could be also included in future research to cover more of the formats involved in broadcast social advertising. Finally, collecting the points of view of vulnerable families and children on such social campaigns could also be included in the design of further studies.

Finally, the results of this study may be useful for advertisers and advertising agencies – especially those specialized in social advertising campaigns – as well as charities, NPOs/NGOs and other third sector entities that work to alleviate situations of vulnerability among children, and policymakers responsible for designing and implementing transformative policies targeting vulnerability.

References

ALLBRITTON, Dean
2014   Prime risks: the politics of pain and suffering in Spanish crisis cinema. *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, *15*(1–2): 101–115. https://doi.org/10.1080/14636204.2014.931663

ALVARADO, María Cruz
2010   *La publicidad social: una modalidad emergente de comunicación* [Universidad Complutense de Madrid]. https://eprints.ucm.es/11522/1/T27111.pdf

ALWANG, Jeffrey - SIEGEl, Paul - JORGENSEN, Steen, et al.
2001   *Vulnerability: a view from different disciplines*. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/SOCIALPROTECTION/Resources/SP-Discussion-papers/Social-Risk-Management-DP/0115.pdf

ANDREASEN, Alan
1994   Social Marketing: Its Definition and Domain. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, *13*(1): 108–114.

DONIS ARELY, Claudia - MARTÍN, Teresa
2017   Representation of the Other in social advertising: Analysis of the graphic advertising of NGDOs in social networks. *Revista Latina de Comunicacion Social*, *72*: 415–429. https://doi.org/10.4185/RLCS-2017-1172

BARNETT, Alison - HODGETTS, Darrin - NIKORA, Linda - CHAMBERLAIN, Kerry And KARAPU, Rolinda
2007   Child poverty and government policy: The contesting of symbolic power in newspaper constructions of families in need. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, *17*(4): 296–312. https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.933

BIDART, Claire - LAVENU, Daniel
2005   Evolutions of personal networks and life events. *Social Networks*, *27*(4): 359–376. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2004.11.003

BÖHNKE, Petra
2008   Are the poor socially integrated? The link between poverty and social support in different welfare regimes. *Journal of European Social Policy*, *18*(2): 133–150. https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928707087590

CANALDA, Arturo
2011   *Menores en los medios de comunicación: información responsable o espectáculo*. http://www.madrid.org/bvirtual/BVCM013910.pdf

CHANG, Chun-Tuan - LEE, Yu-Kang
2009   Framing Charity Advertising: Influences of Message Framing, Image Valence, and Temporal Framing on a Charitable Appeal. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *39*(12): 2910–2935. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2009.00555.x

CHAUHAN, Apurv - FOSTER, Juliet
2014   Representations of Poverty in British Newspapers: A Case of "Othering" the Threat? *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, *24*(5): 390–405. https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2179

CLAWSON, Rosalee A. - TRICE, Rakuya
2000   Poverty as we know it media portrayals of the poor. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *64*(1): 53–64. https://doi.org/10.1086/316759

CONSELL AUDIOVISUAL DE CATALUNYA.
2019   *Recomanacions per al tractament de la infància en els mitjans de comunicació*. https://www.cac.cat/sites/default/files/2019-12/Recomanacions_IA_tutelada_CA.pdf

DiMaggio, Paul - Garip, Filiz
2012   Network Effects and Social Inequality. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *38*: 93–118.
        https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.012809.102545

Echeverría, Martín
2014   Representaciones de la pobreza en contextos de crisis. Un ejercicio desde el análisis crítico del discurso. *Signo y Pensamiento*, *XXIII*(64): 78–94.

Fernandes-Alcantara, Adrienne L.
2011   *Vulnerable and Disconnected Youth: Background and Policies*. Washington-D.C: Congressional Research Service.

Ferriss, Abbott L.
2006   Social structure and child poverty. *Social Indicators Research*, *78*(3): 453–472.
        https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-005-1606-7

Gazso, Amber - McDaniel, Susan - Waldron, Ingrid.
2016   Networks of Social Support to Manage Poverty: More Changeable than Durable. *Journal of Poverty*, *20*(4): 441–463. https://doi.org/10.1080/10875549.2015.1112869

Grané, Aurea - Albarrán, Irene - Arribas-Gil, Ana.
2019   Constructing a Children's Subjective Well-Being Index: an Application to Socially Vulnerable Spanish Children. *Child Indicators Research*, 13: 1235–1254. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-019-09692-w

Grisold, Andrea - Theine, Hendrik
2017   How Come We Know? The Media Coverage of Economic Inequality. *International Journal of Communication*, *11*: 4265–4284. https://doi.org/1932–8036/20170005

Henrich, Joseph - Heine, Steven J. - Norenzayan, Ara.
2010   The weirdest people in the world? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *33*(2–3): 61–83.
        https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X0999152X

Hirsch, Donald.
2013   Paying for Children: The State's Changing Role and Income Adequacy. *Journal of Social Policy*, *42*(3): 495–512. https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/S0047279413000238

Infoadex
2020   *Estudio INFOADEX de la inversión publicitaria en España 2020. Resumen*. https://www.infoadex.es.

Jordan, Amy - Prendella, Kate.
2019   The invisible children of media research. *Journal of Children and Media*, *13*(2): 235–240.
        https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2019.1591662

Kesler, Christel
2015   Welfare states and immigrant poverty: Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom in comparative perspective. *Acta Sociologica (United Kingdom)*, *58*(1): 39–61. https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699314560238

Khanova, Aigul F. - Mazaeva, Tatyana V. - Gallyamov, Filus G.
2017   Some Stylistic Aspects of Social Advertising in Russia. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, *6*(4): 1284. https://doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v6i4.1169

Llano, Juan Carlos
2017   *El estado de la pobreza seguimiento del indicador de riesgo de pobreza y exclusión social en España 2008-2016.* Madrid: EAPN España.

Maholmes, Valerie
2014   Parenting and Family Matters. Contrasting Parenting and Family Processes—Examining Family Strengths and Assets. In *Fostering Resilience and Well-Being in Children and Families in Poverty: Why Hope Still*

Matters. Valerie Maholmes (ed). Oxford University Press, pp. 51–72.
https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199959525.001.0001

MÉNDIZ NOGUERO, Alfonso.
2018   La representación del menor en la publicidad infantil. De la inocencia a la sexualización.
        Methaodos.Revista de Ciencias Sociales, *6*(1): 125–137. https://doi.org/ |
        http://dx.doi.org/10.17502/m.rcs.v6i1.231

MISRA, Joya - MOLLER, Stephanie - STRADER, Eiko - WEMLINGER, Elizabeth.
2012   Family policies, employment and poverty among partnered and single mothers. In *Research in Social
        Stratification and Mobility*, 30(1): 113–128. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2011.12.001

MORSELLI, Davide - DASOKI, Nora - GABRIEL, Rainer - GAUTHIER, Jaques Antoine - HENKE, Julia - LE GOFF,
Jean Marie
2016   Using Life History Calendars to Survey Vulnerability. In *Surveying human vulnerabilities across the life course*.
        Michel Oris, Carolin Roberts, Dominique Joye & Michel Stähli (Eds.) Berlin: SpringerOpen. Pp: 177–
        199

MUTTER, John C
2008   Preconditions of Disaster: Premonitions of Tragedy. *Social Research*, *75*(3): 691–724.

PERRIG-CHIELLO, Pasqualina - HUTCHISON, Sara - KNÖPFLI, Bina
2016   Vulnerability Following a Critical Life Event: Temporary Crisis or Chronic Distress? A Psychological
        Controversy, Methodological Considerations, and Empirical Evidence. In *Surveying human vulnerabilities
        across the life course*. Michel Oris, Carolin Roberts, Dominique Joye & Michel Stähli (Eds.). Berlin:
        SpringerOpen. pp. 87-111.

PINAZO, Daniel
2003   Cambio de actitudes estable. Comunicación social innecesaria. In Vicente Benet & Eloísa Nos Aldás
        (Eds.), *La Publicidad en el Tercer Sector. Tendencias y Perspectivas de la Comunicación Solidaria*. Icaria. pp. 181–
        202.

POPKOVA, Elena - LITVINOVA, Ttatiana - MITINA, Maria - FRENCH, Jeff
2018   Social advertising: A Russian perspective. *Espacios*, *39*(1): 17-26.

ROTHENBÜHLER, Martina - VOORPOSTEL, Marieke
2016   Attrition in the Swiss Household Panel: Are Vulnerable Groups more Affected than Others? In *Surveying
        Human Vulnerabilities across the Life Course. Life Course Research and Social Policies*. Michel Oris, Carolin
        Roberts, Dominique Joye & Michel Stähli (Eds.) *Surveying human vulnerabilities across the life course*. Berlin:
        SpringerOpen. pp. 223–244.

SILVER, Caleb
2020   *The Top 20 Economies in the World*. Investopedia. https://www.investopedia.com/insights/worlds-top-
        economies/

SINGH, Sapam Ranabir - EGHDAMI, Mohammad Reza - SINGH, Sarbjeet
2014   The Concept of Social Vulnerability: A Review from Disasters Perspectives. *International Journal of
        Interdisciplinary and Multidiscipli Nary Studies*, *1*(6): 71–82.

SMITH, N. Craig - COOPER-MARTIN, Elizabeth
1997   Ethics and Target Marketing: The Role of Product Harm and Consumer Vulnerability. *Journal of
        Marketing*, *61*(3): 1–20. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177%2F002224299706100301

SOLÉ, Meritxell - SOUTO, Guadalupe - RENTERIA, Elisenda, PAPADOMICHELAKIS, Giorgios - PATXOT,
Concepció
2020   Protecting the elderly and children in times of crisis: An analysis based on National Transfer Accounts.
        Journal of the Economics of Ageing, *15*: 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeoa.2019.100208

USAMAH, Muhibuddin - HANDMER, John - MITCHELL, David - AHMED, Iftekhar
2014   Can the vulnerable be resilient? Co-existence of vulnerability and disaster resilience: Informal settlements in the Philippines. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, *10*: 178–189. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2014.08.007

WELLMAN, Barry; WORTLEY, Scot.
1990   Different Strokes from Different Folks: Community Ties and Social Support. In *American Journal of Sociology*, 96(3): 558-588.