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# ETHICS AND ADVERTISING

Literature  
review

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## Abstract

*Advertising is often critiqued for not respecting rules of ethics both in the process of advertisement design and in the way it influences society.*

*The main concern of advertisers as representatives of companies that seek profit making is to increase sales, win new clients, increase the demand for the product they want to be presented in as nice and colorful advertisement as possible. They pretend that their product is the best, has unique qualities, better than their competitor's, it has a better cost and brings much more benefits.*

*That is the reason why the great challenge in advertising is to create sales efficient and at the same time moral and true advertising messages.*

## Introduction

The first ethical theories point towards ancient Greek thinkers, Plato and Aristotle. They say that these philosophers (especially the latter) have paved the way for today's fundamental ethical perspectives.

Aristotle's was interested in real moral life, ethics being more than a moral, religious, or legal concept.

*„Aristotelian ethics is not directed towards understanding an eternal and unchanging ideal, but the good that could be achieved by people here, in this world, where they are distinguished by sex, social status, occupation, nationality, and therefore it is different men and women, otherwise, free people and slaves.”*  
(<http://www.crestinortodox.ro>).

To determine what is best for the individual and society, Aristotle says that the man must have three virtues of practical wisdom: temperance, courage and justice. (Ross, D., 1998). Purdel C. (2010) says that he is seeking the importance of moral law for people, for the real life. Moral perfection that could be attained by the man is always only a virtue. Therefore, the purpose of ethics has never been just a mere theory for the man to understand what virtue is, its higher purpose is to add more value to the human life. Immanuel Kant, another great philosopher of the German Enlightenment, presents in his two main works “Critique of Practical Reason” (1788) and “The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals” (1785), presents his ethical system in which reason is the highest court of morals. Kant introduces a new paradigm of ethics and comes with a principle of “the categorical imperative”, considered to be the foundation of morality: “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” (<http://ro.wikipedia.org>) His theory is based on a supreme normative principle, according to which, duty is the need to fulfill the actions out of respect for the law itself, and moral action involves the act of duty, out of pure respect for the moral law itself. Kant's philosophy rejects the notion that the end justifies the means (Gower, 2003). He created a system of ethics based on human ability to discern and on the belief that moral actions are the result of virtuous intentions. (Bivins, 2009)

The categorical imperative prohibited any lie under any circumstances, Kant arguing that rational beings would not tolerate a state of being in which each could lie or kill without remorse (Bivins, 2009). Kant contends that it is always wrong to steal, to lie as it is moral to tell the truth and keep your promises - taking into account the consequences.

Understanding moral laws as some imperatives or orders that retain unaltered their validity (whether or not met), the philosopher from Königsberg is par

excellence the representative of the deontological direction (imperativist), ethical having no consequences for ethics. Kant considers ethics as part of the philosophy that is established by the supreme law, definitive of morality. (Cioar , I.)

Kant is the one who put the foundation of human behavior in the context of deontological ethics.

According to Kantian ethics, we can say that the advertiser must adopt a behavior that has respect for the rights, dignity and status of the public to whom it addresses.

## ETICS - DEFINITIONS

The word “ethics” is derived from the Greek word ethos meaning “character”, “habit”, “custom” and is considered to be equal to the term morality that comes from the Latin word “mores” and means “morals”, “habits”.

Cicero was the one who translated ethos into Latin as “mores”, (Ballet, J. et Françoise de Bry, 2001).

Ethics is a “philosophical discipline that studies human actions and also values and norms to which they conform or should conform.” (Encyclopedia of Philosophy and Human Sciences, 2004).

## ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF ADVERTISING

Ethics in advertising can be seen as a set of moral principles that govern both communication between the seller and the buyer, and also the advertising business.

The benefits of advertising are obvious, as are the benefits of a few elements that are not consistent with ethical standards. It is believed that ethical advertising is a type of advertising that does not lie, promote forgery and lies within limits of decency. As a general rule, the principles of moral order should be also applied to the controversial field of advertising. Human freedom has one purpose: authentic moral response. All information or persuasion attempts must respect human freedom in order to be moral. From the moral perspective, good advertising is an advertising that seeks to determine people to choose and act rationally; bad advertising tries to determine people to do bad things, turns them to destructive actions for themselves and for the community. According to Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1997, advertising should function using the following three moral principles:

- Respect for truth
  - The public should never be deceived
  - False advertising should never be used
  - Truth should never be altered by implying illusory elements or withholding relevant facts
  - An “exaggerated advertising” is acceptable if it is consistent with the practice of rhetoric and symbolism, recognized and accepted. People believe that a certain rhetorical exaggeration or

symbolism is implied in advertising, and this could be illegal by the recognized or accepted practice.

- Respect for human dignity
  - The content of advertising and its impact must respect human dignity. Exhortations are not allowed to concupiscence, vanity, envy, greed, and techniques that manipulate and exploit human weakness should be avoided. Advertising must not offend the dignity, nor through content - through what is advertised, or the way in which advertising is disseminated, or by the impact it has on the audience.
  - Special care should be given to vulnerable groups: children, young people, and the elderly, culturally disadvantaged communities.
- Respect for social responsibility

Advertising generally has a negative image, being frequently associated with ruthlessness. It is viewed as a form of persuasion that exploits human weaknesses, carelessness or lack of knowledge and also uses peoples' lack of media, economic and even civic culture.

Beltramini (2003) describes the ethics of advertising as the last oxymoron due to harsh criticism brought to advertising practices. Rotzoll and Christians (1980) showed in their study that most respondents, industry professionals, encountered ethical problems at the workplace and most responses pointed out to a real interest for doing everything correctly.

Drumwright in the article *The Current State of Advertising Ethics* (2009) overviews briefly the history of ethical definitions, recalling Cunningham's assertion (1999) that defines ethics of advertising as "what is right and good in advertising activity. It is the concern for what should be done morally and is not just legally mandatory.

#### **ADVERTISERS' ETHICS**

The study of Hunt and Chonko (1987) has been conducted from the perspective of the impact of advertising on society and it studies executives in the advertising industry.

Hunt and Chonko (1987) asked advertisers to answer a set of open questions related to ethical dilemmas they encounter in their daily activities.

A large percentage (85%), of respondents reported that they had ethical issues in their daily business.

According to the survey, more than half of the respondents had problems in treating customers honestly, or in designing honest, socially desirable advertisements. (Drumwright, Minette E, 2004).

According to the study conducted by Hunt & Chonko, the most common ethical problems listed were related to: representing clients whose products/services were unhealthy, unwanted, useless or unethical; honest treatment of suppliers,

media, sellers, honest treatment of agency employees and management, and treatment of other agencies.

In 2000, Moon and Franke replicated the study on advertising professionals in Korea. The aim was to compare the answers with the results of previous surveys conducted in the US by comparing ethical issues encountered by advertisers daily in the two countries. The results revealed that more than half of respondents in Korea reported moral problems in their daily activity. (Moon, Young Sook, and George R. Franke, 2000).

Using as a starting point the same study, Chen and Liu (1998) conducted a research on the same topic on practitioners in Taiwan, a research considered by the authors as a first step in understanding the ethics of advertising in Taiwan.

Although over 50% of respondents stated that ethical problems exist in their daily practices, (28.4% replied "sometimes", 18.5 % replied "constantly," and 49.4 % replied "very often."), they are not critical for the activity of advertising agencies in the country. (Chen and Liu, 1998).

Literature review emphasized other two types of debates, on the one hand, the legal discourse between lawyers and the regulating authority that focus on the rights and duties of advertisers (Stern and Eovaldi 1984, Preston, 1996; Prosser, 1984 cited in Drumwright, 2004), and, on the other hand, a moral debate between philosophers, social and ethical critics that concentrate on the social impact of advertising discourse. (Brenkert 1998, Galbraith 1958, 1967; Leiser 1979; Pollay 1986; Pontifical Council for Social Communications 1997; Santilli 1983; Waide in 1987 cited Drumwright, 2004).

A perspective that is worth considering is that of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications regarding ethics of advertising. Although it was published more than 25 years, the analysis is even truer today. Advertising has been described as an important part of economy and market economy has been accepted to be the most efficient instrument in using resources and covering the needs. Analysis of the Pontifical Council has established three basic principles that advertising must adhere to: truth, human dignity and social responsibility "In today's society, advertising influences deeply how people understand life, the world and themselves, especially in terms of values and criteria of judgment and behavior." (Pontifical Council For Social Communications, 1997). As otherwise „Directly addressing human instincts, starting in different ways conscious and free personal reality, you can create consumer habits and lifestyles that are illegal from an objective perspective and often harmful to the physical and spiritual health" (John Paul the II-nd, 1991).

Pratt and James, 1994 also applied ethical theory to advertising professionals. In their study on responses to the scenarios applied to members of

the American Federation of Advertising, Pratt and James argue for the need to apply ethical principles to decision making. The results indicate a reluctance of advertising agencies to establish policies that proscribe unethical conduct (Pratt and James, 1994).

Murphy's study (1998) also researching advertisers concluded that advertisers were aware of controversial social and ethical aspects of their business.

Conclusions of Drumwright and Murphy's study (2004) also had not been encouraging. They found a significant number of practitioners who had not been aware of the ethical issues and had not perceived the problems as ethical ones— what was called by the authors “moral myopia” or if they had found the issues but they still did not want to deal with them at the personal or organizational level – called “moral muteness”.

In this sense, Drumwright and Murphy (2004) support the huge influence of the organizational context on the ethical sensitivity of individuals, being apparently the differentiating factor between ethically sensitive advertising practitioners and those who were “morally myopic or mute”.

Regarding the ethical sensitivity, they found two categories of advertising practitioners, one less ethically sensitive and the other group being more ethically sensitive.

The term “moral” is used in this study as a synonym for “ethical” in order to define the notion of “moral muteness” and “moral myopia”.

Although “moral myopia” and “moral muteness” are often interrelated and mutually reinforcing, the concepts are different.

“Moral myopia” was helpful for authors in defining “moral muteness”. “Moral muteness” refers to people who recognize ethical issues but avoid dealing with them whether at the personal or organizational level. “Moral myopia” is defined by authors as a distortion of moral vision going from myopia to total blindness that affects individual perception of ethical dilemmas.

The study revealed that moral myopia in advertising looks at the issue at the individual, organizational or social levels, it appears mostly at the organizational and societal levels. Moral myopia is therefore a reason of concern and, as in any field, the first step is to recognize it.

When a problem is recognized but is not discussed, then appears “moral muteness”. Authors argue that to correct moral muteness and myopia, advertising practitioners should aspire to developing moral imagination.

According to „Framing Ethical Decisions in UK Advertising Practice’ (2013), ethical aspects in advertising may be linked to: product itself, the content of the message, its target or social consequences (Prendergast et al., 2008; Christy, 2006; Waller, 2005); promotion of harmful

products such as alcohol, cigarettes, pornography, violent games or weapons (Dahl et al., 2003); fraud (Mittal, 1994); racism (Spence and van Heekeren, 2005). (Farrell, T., Schaefer, A., Dibb, S., 2013).

*Cigarette advertisements have been criticized for targeting minority or poor communities (Luke et al., 2000) and for influencing women more than men (Saffer and Dave, 2003). (Dr. Jaspal Singh, Namrata Sandhu, (2011).*

*The authors of the study “Building Ethical Considerations into Advertising Practices – An Indian Study” (2011) carried out a literature review and noticed that authors researched the ethics of advertisements based on sex-appeal (Pollay, 1986; Henthorne and LaTour, 1994), negative psychological effects (Richins, 1991; Lavine et al., 1999; Fay and Price, 1994), advertisements stereotypes (Coltrane and Messineo, 2000; Chatterji, 2005; Schaffter, 2006), materialism (Richins, 1995; Roy 2006) and investigated advertisements targeted at specific audiences, such as children (Haefner, 1991; Conna et al., 1994; Childs and Maher, 2003; Tamburro, Gordon, Apolito and Howard, 2004, Bakir and Vitell, 2010).*

## CONCLUSIONS

Advertising is one of the most pervasive and powerful phenomena in the modern world, an important persuasive force that influences the mentality and behavior.

It shapes social, economic and ethical influence on culture, lifestyle, and our consumption and choices in general.

Throughout life, the human being in its complexity is deeply influenced by advertising, both in the way it perceives itself and in the way it assesses the relationships with others, values, criteria of judgment and behavior of others.

Creating a need artificially, using sexual topics, manipulating the public by means of unrealistic promises, targeting vulnerable groups of consumers, promoting dangerous behaviors are just a few examples of a whole range of criticisms concerning this matter.

Literature review reveals that the understanding of what is good or bad, in terms of ethics, in advertising is especially an issue found in advertising agencies. According to Pratt and James, a solution would be that agencies adopted codes of ethics, self-regulation being one of the best measures advertising industry could adopt for dealing with ethical issues it encounters. Advertising is a contradictory phenomenon, which, on the one hand, is useful for the development of a society, but, on the other hand, has less pleasant effects on society.

Advertising should promote integral and authentic development of the human being.

Advertisers should carry out their businesses ethically; adopt high moral standards related to truthfulness, human dignity and social responsibility. To reduce human progress to an excessive consumption and adoption of a lifestyle without boundaries, will give the public a false vision on development both as individuals and society.

Mankind needs an advertising industry that should be guided by ethical principles. As Aristotle said that in every area of human activity there is an ultimate goal against which other goals we want to achieve are means, and in advertising, the development and transmission of an ethic advertisement are means to an end that is human welfare.

An advertising initiative should aim to influence the public in choosing in a morally good way in order to reach a real individual or group benefit, assuming the achievement of what is morally good. Advertising can have a negative influence, trying to lead people to evil self-destructive ways and also affecting the community.

Compliance with the general interests of the population and society as a whole requires that advertising agencies undertake a moral obligation to consider ethical requirements in solving their daily problems.

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