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Ethics and Advertising - Female Targeted Advertisement and the Ethical Concerns of Practitioners and Scholars

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Abstract: Advertising is believed to be one of the industries that influence today's society the most. From a social point of view, it affects how individuals perceive and interact with others, from a psychological and philosophical point of view it changes people's standards of happiness and from an economical point of view it shapes the buying behavior of individuals. By virtue of its impact, there is an increased concern in the ethical issues that advertising companies encounter. Most of these concerns are addressing the female targeted advertisement, as women represent 80% of individual consumer spending. There are more commercials for women than for men, the majority either involving stereotypes, either redefining attractiveness standards, either portray women in a sexual manner. Thus, this paper is aiming to develop a research design that will allow further examination on how advertising practitioners do treat ethical issues concerning women targeted advertising.

Keywords: *ethics; advertising; female advertisement; ethical concerns.*

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to elaborate a new research design concerning the advertising and ethics subject, with the focus on the advertising practitioners. The research proposal can be further implemented into a legitimate research, following the recommended research design.

Advertising is known as the industry that has the most influence on the society's beliefs and behavior (Jhally, 1987), that has the purpose "to inform targeted consumer groups of the availability and description of products and services, and to persuade consumers to buy them" (Cohan, 2001: 323). By virtue of its economic and social impact, there is an increased concern in the ethical issues that advertising companies encounter. Nevertheless, the literature is not as developed as it should be. To emphasize that, Shaver (2003: 292) argue that advertising ethics is a domain that raises confusion "from the treatment of advertising ethical issues as simply a complicated sub-case of media ethics".

Taking into consideration advertising's impact and the ethical concerns that it triggers, this paper is aiming to develop a research question and a research design that will allow the future researcher to examine how advertising practitioners do treat ethical issues. To narrow the subject, there will be analyzed how advertisement practitioners perceive male's and female's attitudes toward advertising ethics.

Women advertisement takes up a large advertising field, as "women are responsible for 80% of individual consumer spending" (Cohan, 2001: 327) and the research field for advertising ethics for women is also developed compared with other ones (Cohan, 2001; Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008). For the research question in matter, it was thought appropriate to analyze if the women advertisement coverage leads to different approaches toward advertising ethics for male and female public from advertising practitioners. As the majority of studies cover cases from the United States of America, the research question is developed for the German advertising environment:

RQ: What are the differences that advertising practitioners notice between German males' and females' attitudes toward advertising ethics, such as indecent language, nudity, racism and sexuality?

The scientific relevance of this research question is that it offers the possibility to analyze the way advertising practitioners from Germany perceive and approach their publics. The researcher will be able to find out

how advertising practitioners understand ethics and how they customize them for their female and male target groups. For the socio-politic relevance, the researcher will cover the customer rights and gender equality areas. The study will also have a practical relevance, mostly for the German advertising practitioners: they will be able to adjust their ethics policies for female and male publics, taking into consideration the results of the study.

Definition of the central terms

The terms used to constitute the research question should be explained, for its better understanding. This will help the future researcher to comprehend the aim of the research. The main term that could influence the evolution of the study, taking the case when it's not explained in a understandable way, is "advertising ethics". Ethics in advertising is defined as "what is right or good in the conduct of the advertising function. It is concerned with questions of what ought to be done, not just with what legally must be done." (Cunningham, 1999: 500). Among unethical issues that advertising industry might encounter, there can be mentioned: "providing misleading information, using ambiguous terms, and defaulting promised reward" (Yesodha, Kanchana, & Sebastina, 2010: 50). The unethical issues that concern the research question in matter are mentioned: indecent language, nudity, racism and sexuality.

The research question includes the term "advertising practitioners". To establish the significance of it, there should be made a difference between practitioners and scholars. As recognized, advertising practitioners constitute a distinct occupational group and they can create their own knowledge forms, different from those promoted by scholars (Nyilasy & Reid, 2009). Furthermore, "practitioners may have their own set of theories; their own set of boundary conditions and domains of applicability in relation to these theories; unique underlying meta-theoretical assumptions and forms of validity/ reliability testing" (Nyilasy & Reid, 2009: 81). Therefore, the research question is directed towards the inside of the practical field of ethics advertising, not the theoretical one.

Theoretical background

Ethics is considered to be a dominant topic in advertising (Hyman, Tansley, & Clark 1994), yet the advertising ethics academic literature is not as consistent as is should be (Drumwright, 2004). There were identified two distinct ethical concerns regarding the advertising industry: "a legal discourse among lawyers and regulators that focuses largely on the rights of advertisers

and on what they can and cannot do vis –Ã –vis issues such as deception and fraud" (Drumwright, 2004: 7) and "a moral discourse primarily among philosophers, social critics, and ethicists that raises broad and far-reaching questions related to advertising's societal effects" (Drumwright, 2004: 7).

Cohan (2001) identified some of the ethical concerns regarding the advertising industry. The first one would be that "advertising tends to ratchet up the quest for material gain, leading consumers to believe that happiness depends on attaining a high material standard of living, and acquiring more and more things" (Cohan, 2001: 324). Than, it was noticed that advertising "strives to portray a product as something so appealing that you <<ought>> to desire this thing, that you *need* it, and that you should buy it" (Cohan, 2001: 324). Furthermore, the author stated that advertising "often plays on our physical appetites, the body, the pursuit of pleasure, and the avoidance of pain. Preoccupation with the body in advertising affects men and women alike by making them more susceptible to persuasion" (Cohan, 2001: 324).

In the advertising ethics domain there are encountered two major misconceptions: one between regulation and self-regulation (Shaver, 2003) and one between practitioners and scholars (Nyilasy & Reid, 2009). Although there are government regulatory initiatives, practitioners tend to "fall into a medium level of self-regulation" (Shaver, 2003: 294) because "professional guidelines and codes tend to be less specific, sanctions-aside from public opinion – tend to be weak or non-existent, and there are fewer or no enforcement procedures at the group or professional level" (Shaver, 2003: 294). Besides that, there are those who "view the law as the <<floor>> - the moral minimum" (Drumwright, 2004: 12) and "if it is legal, it is ethical" (Drumwright, 2004). To emphasize the self-regulatory action, Zinkhan (1994: 4) stated: "Ethics is an area that requires each individual to take a stand. In the end, each individual must not only decide what is right and what is wrong but must also be able to justify these personal decisions to critics. When making these difficult moral choices, there are many places to turn for guidance, including: personal conscience, company policy, industry standards, governmental law or regulation, and organized religion".

The issue of different ethical perspective between advertising practitioners and scholars comes from the fact that practitioners constitute a distinct occupational group and they can create their own knowledge forms, different from those promoted by scholars (Nyilasy & Reid, 2009). Practitioners can have "their own set of theories; their own set of boundary conditions and domains of applicability in relation to these theories" (Nyilasy & Reid, 2009: 81). Among advertising practitioners there was

determined the so-called "moral muteness" phenomenon (Bird & Waters, 1989). People are morally mute "when they do not recognizably communicate their moral concerns in settings where such communicating would be fitting" (Bird, 1996: 27). Therefore, practitioners "rarely talk about ethical issues" (Drumwright, 2004: 7) and, even though they encounter ethical problems in their daily work (Hunt & Chonko, 1987), they perceive them as "a frequency significantly beyond the mere <<isolated incident>>" (Hunt & Chonko, 1987: 22).

One topic that involves both advertising practitioners and scholars is gender equality (Cohan, 2001). That is because "the human female is used as a means of attracting attention to a product or service" (Cohan, 2001: 326). The majority of ads present women as "submissive, and suggesting that women are constantly in a need of alteration or improvement, or are to feel ashamed of themselves, and dissatisfied in life" (Cohan, 2001: 327). This approach has many consequences on both men and women. Men grow up with the image of the "ideal" women and they also "get a sense of betrayal or dissatisfaction to see that women in their life have flaws or are inevitably too tall, too short, too fat, too skinny or too buxom" (Cohan, 2001: 328). Taking into consideration the large exposure of women in ads, it was determined that they are "less offended by these portrayals than female respondents in 1991" (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008: 71). Even though ads are highly sexualized, participants in Zimmerman and Dahlberg's (2008: 76) study didn't find them "extremely irritating or unethical". The authors concluded in their study that "as the portrayal of women as sex objects in advertisements became more common, young, educated women were less offended by these portrayals" (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008: 77).

Hypothesis

The majority of ads use female figures "as a means of attracting attention to a product or service" (Cohan, 2001: 326). As a consequence, "women are responsible for 80% of individual consumer spending" (Cohan, 2001: 327). Taking into consideration the high coverage of women advertising and the ethics advertising, the first hypothesis was developed:

H1: Advertising practitioners might observe that female consumers have a more sensitive approach toward advertising ethics than male consumers because female figures are more often used in advertisements.

The independent variable is represented by the ads that use in a large percentage female figures and the dependent variable is represented by the female consumers that are affected by the ads.

Ads present sex stereotypes regarding women (Cohan, 2001), the majority of them portraying them as "confused, childish, contradictory, or generally in need of help" (Cohan, 2001: 327). As observed, "women's advertising *redefines* attractiveness from something natural to an unattainable ideal" (Cohan, 2001: 327). Moreover, women are "portrayed as sex objects in advertisement" (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008: 71) in a considerable proportion, as "68 percent, of television programs examined between October 1999 and March 2000 contained sexual content, compared to 56 percent in the 1997-1998 season" (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008: 71). Having the substantial level of sexual imagery present in ads as a reference, the second hypothesis was developed:

H2: Advertising practitioners tend to notice that ads can influence female consumers easier than male consumers because of their sexual content, therefore female consumers are more sensitive regarding advertising ethics than male consumers are.

Here, the independent variable consists in the ads that comprise sexual content and the dependent variable, the female consumers that are affected by the ads.

Research design

The research design chosen for this research is a quantitative one, respectively the analytic survey. That is because "survey research is a method for collecting and analyzing social data via highly structured and often very detailed interviews or questioners in order to obtain information from large numbers of respondents presumed to be representative for a specific population" (Wiseman &Aron, 1970: 37). An analytic survey is meant to "find out why people behave the way they do" (Berger, 2014: 249). Applied to the research question in matter, the analytic survey is aiming to evaluate what are the different behaviors that advertising practitioners have regarding advertising ethics toward female and male publics.

The method for collecting data is thought to be best suited the individual interview via telephone. A survey interview has a "list of questions people are asked to answer and are not structured so that interviewers can explore subjects that come up, by chance" (Berger, 2014: 252). With a survey interview "information can be obtained to make valid generalizations about

the population being studied" (Berger, 2014: 252). The survey interview has also advantages, such as: "interviewer can explain questions in detail; interviewer can use a variety of data collection methods" (Berger, 2014: 253), there is "a higher likelihood of achieving a desired response rate" (Berger, 2014: 253) and it is "not intimidating" (Berger, 2014: 253). Among the disadvantage of a survey interview, there can be mentioned: it can be "too personal; time-consuming and expensive; needs well-trained interviewers" (Berger, 2014: 253).

The interview will integrate both constructed-response question and selected-response questions. A constructed-response question is an open-ended question that "asks for an answer that the respondent should construct by himself or herself, writing it down in the space provided" (Berger, 2014: 258). A selected-response question is a closed-ended question that "asks respondents to select from lists answers provided by the survey designer" (Berger, 2014: 253). In order to compose good questions, the future researcher should consider that good questions are: clear and not ambiguous, short, asking for only one piece of information per question, are logically grouped (Berger, 2014).

The sampling should involve advertising practitioners from German companies, as the research question is meant to answer to an issue regarding the German practitioners. There should be a heterogeneous population, involving practitioners from both sexes, practitioners that have different qualifications and position in the company, from different advertising companies. This way, the researcher will have "representative groups" in order to "survey them randomly, so you can have some confidence that you will get all groups" (Berger, 2014: 264).

The analytic survey is an efficient method to obtain "a great deal of information" (Berger, 2014: 270), as long as "a great care must be taken in designing surveys (...) and in obtaining sample population to survey" (Berger, 2014: 270).

Operationalization of the study

To operationalize the study, the future researcher has to take into consideration the aim of the research question and the analytic survey method theory. As the aim of the research question is to find out whether or not the German advertising practitioners observe different attitudes toward advertising ethics form their male and female public. The sampling should involve advertising practitioners from both sexes, that have different qualifications and position in the company, from different advertising

companies. When writing the interview questions, is should be taken into consideration that the questions should be clear and not ambiguous, short, asking for only one piece of information per question, are logically grouped (Berger, 2014).

The first questions of the interview should be about the practitioner's status: age, gender, status in company. These questions will help the respondents to get used with the interviewer's voice (as the survey is recommended to be conducted via telephone), to become familiar with him or her. Further, the researcher should ask general question about advertising ethics and how does the respondent deal with the ethical issues. An example of questions regarding this topic could be:

- "How often do you meet ethical issues when solving daily tasks?"
- "What are the most common ethical issues encountered?"
- "How do you usually deal with these ethical issues?"

After establishing the general matters, the researcher could than ask about the women advertising ethics and the issues presented in the research question: indecent language, nudity, racism and sexuality. Then, the respondent should be asked if he or she notices any differences when dealing with the female public, respective with the male public. For example:

- "Do you have different procedures when dealing with female public?"
- "What are those procedures?"
- "How about male public?"

The next questions should concentrate on the feedback that practitioners observe and receive from the male and female public. The researcher should focus on this topic, as it answers to the aim of the research. The final questions should ask the respondent if he or she notices his/ her colleague's attitudes toward the issue in matter.

The interview survey is flexible, as the questions "are not structured so that interviewers can explore subjects that come up, by chance" (Berger, 2014: 252). Therefore, the researcher should not be anxious to ask questions that are not incorporated in the guideline.

Limitations of the study, future research

The research is planning to discover whether or not the German advertising practitioners observe different attitudes toward advertising ethics form their male and female public. Although the research's finding could help practitioners, there are some limitations that could be encountered: the researcher might not fully understand the implications of the research

question, he or she might not have enough resources to develop interview questions, the advertising practitioners could not be absolutely open when answering the questions, the interviewer and the respondent could have a language barrier, the sample size might be too broad. All these factors could influence the outcome of the research. The researcher should take into consideration these limitations when operationalizing the research and especially when interpreting the collected data.

Further research questions could cover: how much does the client influence practitioner's ethic approach in an advertising campaign; what are the differences between manager's and operator's attitudes toward advertising ethics; how do practitioners influence their co-workers' ethical choices when developing a campaign ad.

The results of the study could have a large impact on practitioner's perception of ethics. The practitioners will be able to have an overview of how the feedback of ads given by both female and male is perceived by their colleagues. This way, they could adjust their attitudes toward ethics and possibly try to change the ethical policies of their advertising companies.

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