DEFINING THE CONTEXT OF ADVERTISING COMMUNICATION. ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR ADVERTISING TEACHERS

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Abstract. Enthusiastic promises about product effects unbacked by the reality of product features are only part of the story when it comes to advertising lies. Emotional selling propositions, although not amenable to the same true/false evaluations, still have major moral issues to face when confronted with the notion of truth, understood in a pragmatic way – as that which is helpful for our transactions with reality, that which informs us in a correct manner about the path to follow in order to achieve the desired results. When it comes to what is really necessary for a human being to flourish, advertisers often turn out to be dealers in mental poisons, setting forth all sorts of lies about what one needs to be fulfilled as a person. Interposing products between us and the values we desire, on the one hand, interposing social causes we support between us and the products we should only evaluate by their basic features, on the other, advertisements create mental blends that misinform people in a way that goes far beyond what is immediately checkable by product or service tests. The hope behind my work is that it will make future advertisers more responsible towards the discourse they produce and more aware of what it means to lie in an ad. To achieve this purpose I invite them to immerse in a close analysis of advertising's discursive patterns that often leave room for deep and dangerous lies. The analysis I purport is based on the belief that the current compartmentalization of advertisers' moral sense can be dealt with by changing the context against which we place advertising communication in universities. Studies that record the moral myopia and moral muteness of advertisers today suggest that there is an implicit agreement, prevailing within the business community, that ethical questions do not pertain to the language game of business. I believe it all starts in universities and it can be changed by working on how the discipline of advertising is construed. Instead of treating advertising as a tool in the service of the business community, we can draw students' attention to the bigger picture that advertising is part of. Understanding advertising outputs as cognitive entities that influence social reality and participate in building webs of social representations and social facts is essential for future advertisers. I believe it is the academia's responsibility to help future practitioners understand advertising communication in this larger context that illuminates its intrinsic moral dimension.

Keywords: advertising education, advertising ethics, blending theory applied to advertising, social responsibility of advertising, advertising lies.

The construction of advertising as a scholarly discipline

University courses devoted to advertising often treat it only as a tool to grow a business and help it remain well-placed in the minds of its key stakeholders. Although discussions regarding its impact on society could offer educators challenging material for study, they are seldom a central part of the curriculum[1]. Many students who follow such courses end up thinking that to work ethically means primarily to keep in mind that you are answerable to the client who pays for the campaign[2]. When asked about responsibilities towards the consumer, most of them only think of the obligation to avoid false promises that

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[1] Gayle Kerr, Don Schultz, Charles Patti, Ilchul Kim. 2008. "An Inside-Out Approach to Integrated Marketing Communication: An International Analysis", *International Journal of Advertising* 27, 511-548.

[2] Minette Drumright and Patrick Murphy. 2004. "How Advertising Practitioners View Ethics: Moral Muteness, Moral Myopia and Moral Imagination", *Journal of Advertising*, Vol.33, No.2, pp.7-24.

In the version I downloaded, available via Google Scholar, the pages are 1-31. Readers are invited to take note of that detail when they follow the pages I indicate throughout this paper.

would deceive the consumer into thinking that the advertised entity (product/service/institution) has qualities that it does not[3]. However, few of them have an accurate understanding of what is involved in telling the truth when it comes to advertising communication. When understood in a pragmatic manner, as that collection of sentences which are useful in informing us towards future successful transactions with reality, truth is not part of the horizon designed by marketing communication faculties for their students. Ads often put on the collective map of thoughts ideas that are pure poison for our long-term evolution as a person, misinforming us about what we need to be happy or fulfilled, distorting our perception of values and often causing us to misattribute values to objects, refashioning the grand and the small by means of the blends it promotes[4].

Responsibilities stemming from the way ads rhetorically frame specific portions of social reality are not seen as built-in the advertising profession, but as peculiar addenda, fancy ideas belonging to another language-game[5]. They are often subject of discussion for sociologists, social psychologists and philosophers that include it in catch-all categories such as „media today and its vices". Even when they are taught to advertising students, they keep their outer-world flavour and seldom manage to address specific problems related to the advertising profession. Stuhlfaut and Farrell published a study on this topic in 2009 and showed that in many ethics courses devoted to advertising students, *advertising* ethics was relegated to one class section[6]. Michael Prewitt, a fervent Christian and a devoted practitioner of advertising as a profession draws attention to the distance that exists between the specific assumptions of advertising communication today and many of the Codes of Ethics issued by people who do not have direct contact with this industry[7].

Basically, when ethics reaches students, it is only as a general discipline, disconnected from their immediate interests and seldom includes relevant issues specific to advertising. Moral thoughts are not seen as part and parcel of the advertising discipline, as it is taught to future advertising practitioners. This situation has major disadvantages, one of which is that many future advertisers are trained to be „creative" and to write messages that „sell", but have few ideas about the social consequences their ads may have. Universities are accused more and more often of training „narrow technocrats" instead of socially responsible practitioners[8]. Linda Scott makes an interesting observation in this respect. She writes that even industry professionals would think it inappropriate for schools to prostitute themselves by limiting their object of study to an ***imagined industry directive*** to „help sell more stuff"[9] .

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[3] Alice Kendrick, Jami Fullerton and Yeo Jung Kim. 2013. "Social Responsibility in Advertising: A Marketing Communications Student Perspective", *Journal of Marketing Education*, 35(2), p.150.

[4] Ioana Grancea, "Refashioning the Grand and the Small: Meaning and Value Transfer in Print Advertisements Based on Double-Scope Blending", *Argumentum. Journal of the Seminar of Discursive Logic, Argumentation Theory and Rhetoric*, 11 (2), pp. 72-75.

[5] Drumright and Murphy., *op. cit.*, p.13.

[6] Mark Stuhlfaut and Mike Farrell. 2009. "Pedagogic Cacophony: The Teaching of Ethical, Legal, Societal Issues in Advertising Education", *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, 64:173, p. 186.

[7] Michael Prewitt, "The True Worldliness of Advertising:Apologia Pro Vita Mia", *Theology Today* 60, p. 388-391.

[8] Cf. Warren Bennis and James O'Toole. 2005. "How Business Schools Lost Their Way", *Harvard Business Review* (May):1-9 and John Quelch. 2005. "A New Agenda for Business Schools". *Chronicle of Higher Education*, December 2, B19;

[9] Linda Scott. 2008. "Expanding Rhetoric", in: Edward McQuarrie and Barbara Phillips, *Go Figure, Ad Rhetoric*, New York and London: M.E. Sharpep. 311, emphasis mine;

She suggests that one of the ways out of the current narrowness is to perform a novel *declaration*[10] defining advertising as a scholarly discipline:

„It is true that when this field began, the founders *imagined* that the best strategy for winning credibility (and funding and consultancies) for their fledgling enterprise was to embrace science and to imagine themselves at the service of industry. But it was just that - an act of imagination. Since most marketing programs are in state universities, the early scholars could just as easily have imagined themselves in the service of the tax-paying public or even the government (also sources of grant money and other goodies). The founders chose corporate America instead and have acted ever since to exclude the broader concerns of citizens. Yet all that is required to reverse this constraint is a second act of imagination [...] that can free us to address other agendas, if we are only willing"[11].

I believe that including other agendas in the curriculum and giving them equal attention should be a top priority for marketing and advertising teachers. The freedom we have as scholars could be used more fruitfully if we saw ourselves as one of the main sources of guidance towards an integrative approach to advertising communication, an approach that would devote equal attention to the social dimension of advertising and to the commercial one. This way, we may be able to bring some fresh perspectives to practitioners on the work they are performing as social actors, that extends way beyond their commercial role. This may deepen their understanding regarding the responsibilities involved in their profession. The need for an integrative approach does not only envisage the problems ad people have in recognizing or dealing with the moral dimension of their professional actions. An integrative approach would be an effective solution for giving „ethics" courses the necessary data to take into account what is specific to advertising and what advertising today looks like.

Drumwright and Murphy, who have conducted many interviews with advertising professionals and have identified various forms of moral myopia and moral muteness, end their study with implications for the educators:

„Because moral myopia was most acute regarding issues related to advertising's unintented social consequences [...] universities should offer specialized courses dealing with advertising and marketing ethics and also ***integrate ethics into required courses dealing with advertising management, creative strategies, advertising campaigns and marketing management*** [...] Often, ethics materials are relegated to a single chapter or part of a chapter at the end of a textbook, which in itself sends a signal. In the light of recent scandals, many business and professional corporations are realizing the need for training their employees to recognize and deal with ethical dilemmas. It would be embarassing for the educational community to lag behind the professional one."[12]

I strongly believe in the idea of integrating ethical talk into advertising courses instead of introducing separate courses devoted to ethics. In my view, it is the only way we can escape the current compartmentalization that affects the moral consciousness of (future) employees in advertising. Speaking the language of virtue ethics on the same level as that of

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[10]Technical term borrowed from the philosophy of language referring to those explicit or implicit statements by means of which a state of affairs is instituted, a classical example being "I baptize this ship *Elizabeth*" - see John Searle.2010. *Making the Social World*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp.61-90.

[11]Linda Scott, *op.cit.*, p. 311, emphasis mine;

[12]Minette Drumright and Patrick Murphy, *op.cit.*, pp.24-25;

advertising prowess is the only way that we could make students able to recognize and comfortable to bring up such issues when they will deal with real clients at their workplace.

As Drumright and Murphy's interviewees show, many practitioners confess that they separate work ethics from the moral principles they apply in their personal lives. We will name this phenomenon CCF(M) - compartmentalized cognitive framing of moral issues. In other words, some decisions regarding the message content simply bypass advertisers' moral sense because in their mind advertising and morality do not share too many cognitive folders. One of the creative people interviewed by Drumright and Murphy made the following confession: "When I'm at home, all of these things sicken me, really. But when I'm here, it's different, because I'm so into creatively what I'm doing, it's like a different picture"[13](p.11). This point is supported by another interviewee who said that "The client is running a business. They can choose what they want to convey. Therefore, if they want to put in these models who look like they're taking heroin or heroin chic or ultrathin models, then that is their right because it is their business, and they're running it the way that they want to. On a personal level, I find it very offensive". Drumright and Murphy add that "the informant had a young daughter and expressed concern regarding the potential influence of advertising on children and their conceptions of beauty. Nonetheless, she compartmentalized these concerns and […] she did not make a moral judgment or exert influence on the client"[14].

Even when they see clearly that something is wrong, many practitioners are reluctant to bring it up in discussions with the client, because they fear such talk does not pertain to the language-game of business. The name we will use for this phenomenon is CLF (M) - compartmentalization (of their moral sense) in the linguistic framing of moral issues. An example of CLF(M) is the following excerpt from Drumright and Murphy's interviews:

"The reason the agency doesn't want to come in and say 'hey, this isn't ethical', is because they would be laughed out of the office. I think they're afraid the client would say, 'well, if you want to run a church, run a church, but if you want to make money, you're going to have to do it our way. I think that there is a fear that, if they were to talk about it [ethical concerns], then all of a sudden, they would be taken less seriously as a business person. And they would be looked upon suspiciously as someone who has let their religious philosophies get in the way of their business acumen"[15].

The quotes above confirm the idea that serious boundaries are placed not only on how practitioners *think* about moral issues in advertising, but also on what they *dare to express* regarding the problems that appear. The two forms of compartmentalization mentioned above are based on the premise that future practitioners are familiar with moral standards of society and understand their implications but are unable to apply them equally to this area of activity due to current constructions of advertising activity. However, it is not always the case. Students often need to be adequately trained for *recognizing* moral issues and understanding their implications upon oneself and other people as well. We will use RD(M) to refer to the ability of recognizing and dealing with moral issues. University courses, especially those based in the social sciences, should provide an agora to consider

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[13]*Ibidem.*, p.11.
[14]*Ibidem.,* p.11.
[15]*Ibidem.*, p.13.

issues of morality in a systematic and profound manner. Theodore Roosevelt's warning that to educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society should be in the centre of university education. If students do not have a clear image of the consequences that advertising may produce apart from that of modifying brand indicators, it is quite unlikely that they will be able to understand fully the problems that specific messages may cause when reaching the audience.

In my own experience as a teacher working with undergraduate students in advertising, I find certain behavioural patterns when approaching books that criticize advertising for the hedonism, individualism and materialism it promotes. Students often have difficulties in understanding what exactly is the alternative to these attitudes. Raised in an age that exults pleasure for its own sake, it is hard for them to express any dissatisfaction with hedonistic messages or even see what exactly is wrong with them. Sometimes I feel they assume that advertising deals with the "fun" aspects of life, while authors writing advertising critique are holders of weird premises regarding what is valuable in being a person. Many books that accuse advertising of dislocating values from their context and making them conditional on some aquisition seem rather mysterious to many of my students, because they are already brought up in a cognitive environment that has made such ideas seem natural and self-evident. The values that these authors mention seem unrelated to how things work in 'real' life. The influence of popular discourse on our perception of social reality is seldom acknowledged. Deeply poisoned with relativistic standpoints when it comes to morality, many of them do not understand why it is not acceptable for people to simply follow their own pleasures and build their moments of fun as they wish, sometimes even bringing brands in for additional fun. To put it in a nutshell, they do not see any alternative to the behaviours promoted by advertising and therefore cannot perceive the rhetorical framing that takes place inside many ads. On the other hand, when it comes to the advertising profession, they are surprisingly relaxed towards slogans such as „tell the truth well" flaunted by many specialists in public relations and advertising, which esentially means to frame reality in a manner that puts the paying company in the best light. Most of them believe it is the audience's responsibility to select what is to be kept in one's mind from the many ideas and invitations sent out by ads. However true, these pieces of advice show very naive views on the human mind and on advertising as social communication as well. Even if such naive views are ideas with which they come to the university, we have no excuse in letting them leave the university with the same superficial understanding regarding moral responsibility. The university, the agora for critical thinking and intelligent debate, cannot be allowed to become a place where wooden language for corporate servants is taught. It can do better than that. Indeed, it has the duty to do better than that.

Important steps along developing a moral approach to advertising

As discussed in the first section, the university has oversimplified its job in what regards advertising education and has left many blind spots in what concerns morality and social responsibility.

The core proposition that I am making is that students should be aware of the fact that advertising shapes the contents of collective representations regarding many social

entities[16] (i.e. brands) and influences the social contruction of many issues that are essential for our fulfillment as persons and for our health as society. On one level of description, trademarks are created by means of a set of legal procedures that ensure property rights over a name and a set of physical stimuli that accompany it such as the logo, specific sounds, shapes and so on. Yet, for a brand to influence buying decisions, it needs to have a meaning to people. Brands become known and come to have a meaning in the minds of their audience by means of brand communication - advertising being often the most prominently used tool to weave webs of meaning around a brand. In the course of producing brand meanings, advertising often puts certain thoughts on the public map, thoughts about what happy families look like, thoughts about what makes you live fully as a woman or a man, thoughts about what are the leisure activities that are worth investing in. In other words, it *frames* all sorts of issues in the process of associating them with brand meaning. These issues are often delivered to us through advertisers' eyes, who select and refashion meanings according to their momentarily inspiration or to their clients' requirements. One needs to wonder about the influence that these thoughts may have when they are made public and repeated daily via multiple channels such as print, radio, TV, Internet, social media and so on. But to pose such questions, one needs to have the proper language to do that and a set of background assumptions that enable the intelligent articulation of these issues. So, first of all, we need to revise the current background assumptions, see where they come from and what can be done about the moral gaps they display.

Books written by practitioners make it easy to neglect this intrinsic social responsibility by focusing students' attention on other dimensions where excellence is expected from them, dimensions that are apparently independent from any moral requirements. In many of the books written by famous practitioners, *creativity* itself is lifted to the status of moral responsibility towards clients and audiences likewise. *Creativity* seems to be the chief virtue that ad practitioners train for. Leo Burnett's famous saying that the greatest danger of advertising is not that of misleading people, but that of boring them to death is a pretty good illustration of the slogans that drive the consciousness of future members of the advertising industry.

If we never discuss anything except for how well some campaigns did on a creative level, we should not wonder why CCF(M) symptoms appear later on when students are practitioners. How uncool would it be for a student to lift his hand up and say "this message has major ethical issues" when the whole class exults the creativity of the team that made the campaign? The answer I want to emphasize is this: it is as "uncool" as we let it be. It depends on the kind of platform we build for students to think about such issues, to address moral problems, to understand them in the course of debating about them together, in class, on a background of healthy moral standards.

Students should be made familiar with the discursive patterns that advertising is based on. To create and consolidate brand meaning in the audience's minds, advertisements often base their discourse on conceptual integration networks. This notion is imported from Cognitive Linguistics, where it describes the mappings that our minds do between

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[16] John Searle, *op.cit.*, pp.90-123.

previously aquired folders with information in order to make sense of the world around and to decide on the future course of action[17]. Our minds blend information coming from different folders (called "input spaces") to create a new mental space that contains all the data necessary for solving the problem at hand. I advance the notion of *rhetorical blending* to refer to those discursive expressions of mental blends created purposefully to influence the audience. *Rhetorical blending* is at the core of advertising communication, since any advertisement connects, on an intradiegetic level, different cognitive entities in order to send out an implicit or explicit message about the brand that is the object of persuasion. The morality of this operation is threefold. Input space 1 is represented by the brand, its identity and key promises. Input space 2 is represented by the elements that are brought in, whose ethical contribution needs to come under close scrutiny. Finally, the emergent structure that results needs to be put too under a moral lens. Most ethical talks that were brought up in the first section are based either on the first input space or on the second one, but never address the blended space that results. Many ethical issues can escape our attention if we approach things in this reductionist manner.

In what follows, I will bring up one examples to show how the framework I propose can help ethical talks get in better shape. Let us discuss a campaign made for City Bank by the ad agency Fallon Worldwide in 1999, a case recounted by members of the agency in their book, *Juicing the Orange: How to Turn Creativity into a Powerful Business Advantage*[18]. The campaign's slogan was "Live richly" and it contained an impressive number of ads that expressed in various forms the idea that there is more to life than money. Quite a peculiar proposition for a bank, one might say at first sight. The ads ran through city centres promoting ideas such as "Go ahead, use the good China!", "He who dies with most toys is still dead", "Life is more than money. There is a bank, one that understands that. City Bank". The strategy behind the campaign is recounted in detail in the abovementioned book. The research Fallon had conducted had shown that the ideal audience to target were those people who went to a bank for small loans, usually for special occasions in their lives. Most of them needed additional money to go on a special trip, to meet the expectations of wedding guests or to make a special present to someone dear. The bank was there to ensure them that it is ok to spend more for the loved ones, because their love is a blessing that makes you rich in the true sense of the word. However, looked upon more closely, in the light of *blending theory*, this proposition raises ethical problems. Input space 1 here is City Bank, the bank that provides money for special occasions and has all the interest in persuading its audience to spend more. To do this, it makes it look as if spending a lot of money on special occasions is not waste, nor irresponsibility, but a nice way to show your Gratitude to God and your dear ones - input space 2, "a sure way to become rich is to count your blessings[19]. The input spaces 1 and 2 are not morally condemnable, but the emergent blended space that ensues has serious problems. Input space 1 represents the bank's message in a pretty honest manner. Input

[17] FAUCONNIER, Gilles and Mark TURNER. 2002. *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. New York: Basic Books, 40, 120.
[18] Pat Fallon and Fred Senn, *Juicing the Orange: How to Turn Creativity into a Powerful Business Advantage*, Romanian translation: *Creativitatea în publicitate*, Editura ALL, 2008, pp. 23-38.
[19] *Ibidem.*, p.33;

space 2 is one of the sweet invitations that almost sound like a social campaign reminding us to be grateful for the loved ones. But the blend between them is in need of closer investigation: why correlate gratitude with spending more? Is this invitation to waste good for the client's interest? Couldn't we count our blessings without spending too much on a wedding or an exotic trip? What about those who can't afford to make such a loan? Should we conclude that they are less grateful for the blessings they received? These questions are worth posing, because they bring us to see that the message is esentially a lie, in a pragmatic sense. It creates an artificial connection between expressing love for the dear ones and not minding the waste you make. While discussing such a case in class, advertising teachers should invite students to exercise their creative skills by producing a message that would overcome this problem.

The example above illustrates that discussions regarding the morality of the connotations brought about by the emergent space are not to be neglected. Similar analyses can be done on all the commercials discussed in advertising seminars, by taking the results of *rhetorical blending* under scrutiny and developing, through debates and creative exercises, alternative ways of communicating creatively and morally around a brand. This would increase students' ability to evaluate creative activity by using more relevant standards than those that are currently popular and would ultimately improve their ability to recognize moral problems when they appear. Unexpected associations prove the innovativeness of our minds and should always be appreciated, but one needs to see what exactly those associations communicate about the brand or the portion of reality that is brought into discussion. For example, an acclaimed ad for the Romanian Peasant Museum showed peasants doing their usual activities and accompanied them with unexpected lines borrowed from the world of youngsters. Three women dressed in national costumes who were chatting by the roadside were described as age-old versions of forum and webchat, a man playing a flute in front of his house was accompanied by a copy that described the enthusiasm of the crowd towards this "unplugged concert" and a set of traditional costumes were described as the new collection, pret-a-porter on all lanes. Of course, students would exult the creativity of this association and find it very enjoyable to read, but one needs to wonder what message is sent exactly about the Romanian Peasant Museum. In my view, these emergent spaces are not faithful to what this museum is about. The fascinating things about Romanian peasants are hardly the fact that they are always in fashion and they are just like "us", their contemporaries. All the contrary. What makes them different from us is perhaps what we need to cherish. From *Homo admirans*, the audience is lifted to the status of *Homo admiratus*, so painfully coherent with the patterns of consumer society.

I guess that in the light of the above examples, the reader can see why the lens provided by Blending Theory can help us understand better the possible rhetorical effects of advertising discourse and thus discuss them on a moral background. Without a doubt, more data about the discursive underpinnings of our collective representations needs to be provided to help students see advertising against its real background, that of social institutions and not confined into some imaginary walls of the business community.

postdoctoral scholarship" ("Inovare şi dezvoltare în structurarea şi reprezentarea cunoaşterii prin burse doctorale şi postdoctorale").

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