

The relationship between creativity, ethics and environment issues essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



1. Background – Advertising

For more than a decade now, the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has carried out regular mapping surveys that attempt to quantify the contribution that creative industries make to the country. It recognizes a total of thirteen creative industries, which include “ Crafts, Design, advertising, Architecture, Designer Fashion, Film & Video, Art & Antiques, Television & Radio, Interactive Leisure Software, Music, Performing Arts, Publishing, and Software & Computer Services” (DCMS, p. 4)

In this paper, we shall focus on advertising and more specifically on environmental and ethical issues in this industry. Advertising has been defined as “ the non-personal communication of information usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature about products, services or ideas by identified sponsors through the various media”(Bovee and Arens, p. 7).

Depending on the channels through which the advertising message is delivered, advertising can be described as either “ above the line” or “ below the line.” Above the line advertising is where the marketing communication is carried out through media outlets that include the print media (for example newspapers, magazines, and journals) and electronic media (for example television, radio, and the internet). On the other hand, below the line marketing is where the message is delivered through the other channels such as through the product’s packaging, through sales promotion campaigns, and so on (Advantage, p. 1).

Apart from providing information utility, advertising plays a critical role in the economy of any country. It provides employment opportunities, facilitates the consumption of commodities, and helps companies to strengthen their brand recognition. Within the UK, the advertising industry is well developed. Alongside with New York, London is regarded as the global capital of creative advertising. As a matter of fact, the UK remains the largest advertising market in the whole of Europe, with over 67% of all advertising agencies operating in the continent having their headquarters in the kingdom. With 205 advertising revenues estimated at 19 billion pounds (about 1.6% of UK's GDP), the advertising industry in the UK has continued to witness phenomenal growth (Advantage, p. 3).

The largest component of the UK advertising industry is accounted for by the print media comprising of newspapers, directories and magazines which collectively account for more than 45% of all industry revenues. Television advertising comes in a distant second, accounting for just over 25% of all industry revenues, followed by direct mail (at 12.5%), outdoor forms of advertising (which gross in 5.5% of industry revenues), the internet (at only 7.2%, but growing fast), radio (at just over 3%) and cinema which brings in the rear with just 1% of industry revenues (Advantage, p. 3).

Like every other sub sector within the creative industry, creativity and innovation are the main sources of competitive advantage and differentiation within the UK advertising industry (Halinen, 1997). However, in addition to creativity, a firm's responsibility towards its environment has become of vital importance in determining the organization's success. Of vital importance in

also determining success in the UK advertising industry are perceptions about whether the firm in question observes ethics or not.

Ethics has been defined as the moral code by which a person distinguishes what is right from what is wrong. There is no universal code of morality and therefore ethics is highly subjective. What is right to one person may not necessarily be right for another (Kidder, 66; Farrell and Farrell 587; Schwartz 247). Of late, the issue of ethics within the UK advertising industry has gained a lot of prominence.

To explain the changes that have taken place, Willis (2) introduces the concept of the “triple bottom-line.” Traditionally, firms were only interested in their profitability. The investor was considered to be the most important stakeholder and the firm’s reason for being was to maximize his returns. However, as the business environment has become increasingly complex, the success of the business now rests more on satisfying a whole range of stakeholders and not just the investor. In addition to the interests of the investors, the firm now has to satisfy the interests of employees, the society, and other stakeholders such as the government, suppliers and creditors. In addition to profitability therefore, Willis (p. 2) suggests that the other two components of his triple bottom-line” concept are social responsibility and environmental responsibility.

While some industry players are conforming to ethical best practices because doing so is good for their conscience, others are driven by the impact that doing so would have on their customers and their bottom lines.

Petrick and Quinn (p. 106) state that one motivation for firms to act ethically is to circumvent regulatory sanctions that the government can impose due to unethical behaviour. Yet others act ethically because doing so has a positive impact on their profitability, as well as on employee motivation and in earning the firm a positive reputation (Schwepker, 377; Vitell and Davis, p. 489).

In addition, the standards of ethics have been changing. For example, at one time it was perfectly acceptable to advertise cigarettes while advertising of condoms was frowned upon. Today, advertisement of condoms is widely acceptable within UK society, while advertisement of cigarettes is frowned upon (Harman, p. 3).

1. The relationship between creativity, ethics and environmental issues with regard to the UK Advertising Industry

Bierly, Kolodinsky and Charette (p. 1) carried out a study that aimed to establish the relationship between creativity and ethics. In their study, they used Forsyth's model of moral philosophy. This model has two independent variables – relativism and idealism, and a dependent variable – creativity. The hypothesis of their studies was that creativity was positively related to relativism. After collecting and analyzing data, their findings confirmed the hypothesis that there indeed exists a positive relationship between creativity and relativism.

The three researchers concluded that in arriving at moral decisions, creative people or people in the creativity industry “ are less likely than non-creative

people to follow universal rules in their moral decision making.” This finding was in agreement with earlier studies that have arrived at the same decision, suggesting that creative people are more predisposed to challenge the established laws, values and norms and are therefore likely to be less ethical than the non-creative people.

However, unlike previous studies which established a negative relationship between creativity and idealism (suggesting that creative people have no scruples), the study by Bierly, Kolodinsky and Charette (p. 2) established a positive relationship between the two. The researchers therefore suggest that contrary to earlier assertions, creative people are not insensitive to others, but are also full of idealism. The overall conclusion thus was that the decisions that creative people make are highly situational. This then implies that in some situations, creative people would act ethically while in others they would not. Therefore, while they may have an ethic of caring, they also have a “ pragmatic moral decision making style” (Bierly, Kolodinsky and Charette, p. 2).

The findings by Bierly, Kolodinsky and Charette (p. 2) are consistent with the ethical conduct of the UK advertising industry as well as its attitude towards the environment. According to Harman (p. 3), advertising agencies in the UK are obsessed with their profitability, at the expense of best ethical practice. Apart from the eye on the bottom-line, the only other thing that seems to drive them is the short term success of their clients. To underscore this, Willis quotes a Gallup poll that was conducted. This poll sought to rank industries based on people’s perceptions of the industry’s position on ethical

issues. Out of forty five professions, the advertising industry came in a poor 43rd .

To illustrate this, he cites the strenuous defence put up by the advertising industry for tobacco advertising even when it was clear that tobacco is harmful to human health. The advertisers' position was that as long as tobacco was a legal product, it was right for them to advertise it regardless of the harm it committed. This brings to the fore the issue that what is legally permissible may not be ethically correct. By arguing that it was not for them to decide what was wrong or right but for the government, the advertising industry demonstrated its lack of concern for ethics on the tobacco advertising issue (Harman, p. 3).

Another issue of ethical significance that has been associated with the advertising industry is what might be called its manipulation of people into buying products that they have little or no use of. By using appeals such as the sex appeal, advertising preys on human weaknesses to create needs that people can do without, the result of which is that they end up buying. In support of this assertion, Lasch (p. 180) writes that ' Modern advertising seeks to promote not so much self indulgence as self doubt. It seeks to create needs, not to fulfil them: to generate new anxieties instead of allaying old ones. It addresses itself to the spiritual desolation of modern life and proposes consumption as the cure. However, others have made the argument that rather than blame advertisers, the blame should lie squarely with the UK society which has become too materialistic and consumerist. They contend that advertising is merely a response to societal dictates.

Sometimes, the advertising agencies use advertisements that are misleading just to get people to buy. For example, they may promise benefits which the products in question cannot actually provide. The customers would buy those products on the basis of the promised benefits only to discover later on that the products do not provide those benefits. Image advertising, where the consumption of certain products is hyped as the gateway to a more fulfilling, aspirational life is also unethical though many advertisers continue to pitch products on that platform (Harman, p. 3). Bullmore (p. 16-18) splits hairs on this issue when he states that the industry's use of hyperbole in crafting ads is perfectly acceptable because it neither distorts nor hides any truth, while spin is not acceptable because it is out and right misleading.

Apart from that, advertisements have also been associated with the perpetuation of stereotypes such like all women are obsessed with the quality of their washing, which may not be necessarily true. By creating advertisements without thinking through the consequences of their ads, the advertising industry has caused harm to society. An example that immediately springs to mind is that of the Tango megaphone advertisement where an overweight actor was cast in the role of a persecuted coke drinker. The effect of this was to increase bullying in schools, and as a result the relevant authorities were forced to ban it (Harman, p. 3).

While many advertising firms are taking steps to ensure that they are ethically responsible, many more others are engaging in what has come to be known as "greenwashing." This is the practice where firms in the industry are putting up spins that convince the consumers that they act

ethically, when in actual fact they have not taken any measures to change the way they think and work to conform to ethical best practice standards. An example that Willis cites is that of BP's "beyond petroleum" ad campaign where the firm positions itself as a green fuel firm when in actual fact it is involved in little or no production of green fuel (Harman, p. 4).

Maher, Herbst, Childs and Finn (p. 80-93) carried out a research on the involvement of children in television ads. Their research examined one hundred and fifty five television advertisements and sought to establish the extent to which children from minority groups were represented. The study concludes that relative to Caucasians, children from all minority groups were grossly underrepresented raising serious issues of racial stereotyping by advertising agencies in the UK.

To call attention to their products, advertisers occasionally resort to using women as sex objects in their ads, churning out ads that are of questionable decency standards. An example is with the launch of Yves St Laurent "Opium" perfume. The ads for the new products featured a naked woman and were placed in fashion magazines but also on billboards placed in high visibility strategic locations. Zimmerman and Dahlberg (p. 71-79) carried out a study on the use of women as sexual objects in advertisements. With the respondents drawn from just over ninety undergraduate students, the study established unanimity of opinion regarding the fact that women were indeed used as sex objects by advertisers in order to sell products. In spite of this objectification, the respondents reported that they would still go ahead with their purchase decisions.

Yet another study by Bullmore (p. 4-16) shows that as consumers have become increasingly sophisticated and found ways to circumvent advertisements, advertisers are getting into the practice of “flying under the radar”, that is, disguising their advertisements as something else. According to Bullmore, “Product placement is one example, when consumers are not told that the programme featuring a product has been sponsored. This is analogous to a decline in rigour in journalism and news reporting, and while this trend against transparency is unlikely to harm consumers, it may do great damage to marketing, which will become not only less respected, but also less effective.”

However, as Brown (p. 18-19) points out, in spite of the ethical failures in the advertisement industry, there have been a lot of changes especially with the growing intervention of the government. The result is that advertising has increasingly become politicized. For instance, the alcohol advertising debate has been reduced to binge drinking, nutrition has become about obesity, while the focus on the advertisement of cars has shifted from speed to the environment.

Other ethical issues as relate to advertising that are considered significant enough to warrant mention include direct to consumer (DTC) drug advertising which has been found to influence behaviour (Huh and Becker, 2005, p. 441-466), advertisements targeted at young children (Preston, p. 61-67; Livingstone, p. 273-296, Young, p. 441-460).

Dickerson and Dorsett (149 -171) have studied the impact of alcohol advertising on alcohol consumption in the UK. Utilizing the AlcoVision survey, the study focused on two classes of consumers: those over 25 and those between 18 and 24 years. They were able to establish that the factors most influencing consumption were pricing, in trade promotion (as described earlier, this is a form of below-the-line marketing), and the growing preference for drinking at home. They conclude that advertising does not play any role in influencing alcohol consumption in the UK. However, as “ Ethical Issues (p. 3)” demonstrates, the average teenager will get exposed to more than 75, 000 ads before he reaches the age of maturity. With these ads emphasizing pleasurable experiences with drinking, and given the American Psychological Association’s assertion that “ children lack the cognitive development to understand the persuasive intent of advertising” their influence on them to take up drinking cannot be discounted.

Golberg (p. 431-440) examined the motivators behind smoking among youths and finds that tobacco smoking plays a significant role in creating primary demand for cigarettes and inducing smoking behaviour among youths. By underscoring issues such as independence and youthful vigour, the ads have been found to be very potent particularly in appealing to teenagers to take up smoking.

According to Feldwick (p. 20-23), with the emergence of new media which are as yet to fall under the ambit of legislative restraint, advertising that utilizes these channels has become more intrusive, with flagging standards of decency, honesty and truthfulness.

In spite of this, there are many advertising agencies in the UK which are increasingly standing up for ethical behaviour. For instance, before it closed shop two years ago, Howell Henry Chaldecott Lury & Partners (HHCL) had come up with a framework for ethical behaviour in the advertising industry which they christened “responsible desire.” This is based on two cornerstones: refraining from doing harm, and doing good. It involves going to great lengths to understand the unintended consequences that an ad can have, and taking measures to stop them, without quietly compromising the creativity or distinctiveness of the ad. It also involves being proactive in the promotion of good. An example is HHCL’s ad for Homepride which “dramatised the authenticity of its product by using ethnically diverse British families” (Harman, p. 5).

The relationship between creativity and idealism, as illustrated by Bierly, Kolodinsky and Charette’s study (p. 2) can also be seen in the industry’s efforts to regulate itself in order to ensure adherence to ethical and environmental best practice. This is done through the UK Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), which is “the longest-established, best-funded and most respected advertising self-regulatory system in Europe.” With uncompromising standards of advertising, it has overseen the transitioning of the industry to one that is more ethical, giving a lot of meaning to its mission of ensuring that all advertisements carried out in the industry are “Legal, Decent, Honest and Truthful.” Apart from addressing concerns from the members of the public, it also checks ads before they are rolled out, ensuring that only those that conform to its ethical standards get to be rolled

out. With the placing of television broadcasting under the oversight of this body, it is expected that standards of ethics will increase even further (Key Facts).

3. Conclusion

As illustrated, the relationship between creativity on the one hand and issues of ethics and the environment on the other hand within the UK advertising industry are complex. They conform more to the inferences drawn by Bierly, Kolodinsky and Charette (p. 2) in their study. The relationship between these issues portrays a positive link between creativity and ethical relativism.

Considered in light of previous studies that established much the same, the UK advertising industry would be considered as generally being insensitive to ethical concerns. These would be supported by the industry's attitude towards alcohol and tobacco advertising, the use of women as sex objects, ads targeted at young children, the practice of "greenwashing", "flying under the radar" and the persistent use of image advertising.

However, Bierly, Kolodinsky and Charette (p. 2) also establish a positive relation between creativity and idealism, which strongly suggests that the industry is not insensitive and without scruples, but is caring and sensitive to correct standards of behaviour. This would be supported by the industry's unparalleled success in self-regulation through the UK ASA, as well as individual efforts made by advertising agencies to act ethically and respond to environmental concerns. The conclusion then is that like every creative person, the UK advertising industry displays an ethical decision making

behaviour that can be described as “ situational” and “ pragmatic”, rather than conforming to any universal code of ethics.

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