

The Use of Traditions and Moral Values in Advertising

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Abstract: *The paper discusses how certain traditions and moral values are used in advertising. There are two main categories of situations in this context: the case of advertisers who want to promote traditions or moral values and use advertising techniques to achieve their communication goals and, on the other hand, the case of advertisers who have communication goals among the most and choose to use, in advertising discourse, elements related to the tradition or moral values of the target population. Although advertising techniques may be similar in these two cases, the impact is different because it depends on the relationship created in the traditions/moral values conveyed and the communication objective pursued so that advertising can often generate controversy. In our presentation we will exemplify both situations with cases from the Romanian and international advertising environment, in order to show the advantages of these types of communication, but also the limits in their use.*

Keywords: *Advertising, ethical and moral values, heroism, family, pandemic, tradition.*

1. Introduction

The world of marketing, a world par excellence mercantile, seeks to capitalize on the interest of commercial communication any arguments capable of „selling”, so it should not be surprising when ethical or moral arguments are used as a basis in building advertising discourse. On the other hand, it should not be ignored that traditions, as well as moral values need to be defended, and those organizations involved in supporting non-commercial causes or goals can only succeed by using professional communication techniques of marketing.

In the context of the medical crisis generated by the covid 19 epidemic, the topic is all the more current as a number of values are conveyed in the information campaigns, including of an ethical or moral nature. In the first part

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of the paper we approached the ethical aspects that theoretically mark the marketing communication, as well as the institutional framework that intervenes in ensuring ethical principles in the case of advertising communication. We have emphasized, on this occasion, the reason why certain values, although ethically accepted, are still rejected at the individual level, where the moral dimension is manifested, which justifies the rejection of advertising messages or their different perception from a group of person to another.

In the second part, we exemplified the use of advertising campaigns in order to promote ethical and moral values so that, in the last paragraph, we show how certain ethical/moral values or traditions are taken over to help build advertising in campaign with objectives not directly related to these values, which is why they also generated contradictory debates or were challenged.

2. Ethics: self-regulatory criteria and advertising argument

Discussions about the harmful role of advertising on the individual or society are not recent. They bring a wide range of arguments, from creating false needs and changing the way the individual relates to the purpose of consuming products, to the economic implications of consumption, over stimulated by marketing promotion.

Consumerism, for example, as a phenomenon of today is directly influenced by the action that advertising exerts on individuals by stimulating psychological needs, which have become a priority in the buying process.

The influence of advertising is limited to the adult audience, but also reaches categories that, due to age characteristics, are more vulnerable to arguments or patterns of behaviour promoted by advertising (e.g. children, adolescents). There are countless studies that show that advertising brings products in attention to these categories of audiences, draws attention to products and can influence their purchase [9].

In addition, the advertising communication influence the way in which certain concepts are defined at the level of a company. Advertising cultivates appearances and „builds” a certain conception of what it means to be beauty, well-being, and happiness. Advertising arguments exploit the full range of human feelings, including negative ones, such as selfishness, envy, pride, hedonism. Individuals buy products to overcome their frustrations, to become

more attractive, to have a better social position. Pleasure, passion and happiness itself are redefined [26].

In the electoral field, advertising tends to benefit parties with financial power, which can support media campaigns, to the detriment of small parties or independent candidates.

a) The use of ethical principles in the self-regulation of the advertising sector

A solution to limit the slippage in the field of advertising is provided by the legislative and institutional framework. The legislation, for example, aims to protect the various categories of audiences targeted by advertising communication (citizens, voters, children, patients, etc.), to ensure free competition and to respect the general public interest. A number of public institutions have assumed a regulatory and control role in this regard (such as, for example, the Romanian National Audiovisual Council). In addition, a number of self-regulatory bodies operate at both national and international levels. Self-regulation does not replace legislation, but is complementary and operates within a specific legislative framework. The self-regulatory system includes companies that use advertising to promote themselves, advertising agencies and media companies that broadcast advertising. Together, the three categories of actors assume the responsibility of self-control, contributing to the adoption of standards in advertising, organized in codes, and ensuring the control of their observance.

In Romania, the self-regulatory body established by the advertising law (Law no 148/2000) is the Romanian Advertising Council (RAC) and the “Code of Practice in Advertising” adopted by RAC establishes the ethical rules of professional conduct in advertising, but also in any form of commercial communication, being mandatory for its members. The Code does not apply to subjects regulated by normative acts, but supplements the applicable laws.

At the international level, national self-regulatory bodies are affiliated with the international ones, thus assuming their support for the codes of professional ethics adopted at the international level. One such code, renowned for its tradition, is the International Chamber of Commerce Code, which has been in place since 1937 and is a benchmark for national self-regulatory bodies [27].

It follows that there is a definite interest on the part of the legislature, but also of advertising professionals and companies that use advertising to better regulate the field of advertising; this approach involves taking ethical principles and integrating them into the deontological guidelines taken into account in advertising and marketing communication.

b) Ethical values as an advertising objective or an advertising argument. The difference between ethics and morality

The problem is, however, what happens when ethical values themselves become the subject of communication or, moreover, the vector of advertising communication itself. Thus, there are many situations in which advertising is used in the non-commercial field, to support the promotion of idea or social causes (from humanitarian, to environmental protection or to encourage responsible consumption). In this case, the promoting organizations aim to raise awareness among the target audience about certain social issues or behaviours that have an ethical dimension or ethical/moral implications. It is the situation in which advertising is put in the service of “promoting” ethical or moral values. An opposite situation is when advertising agencies, out of a desire to use original or compelling advertising concepts, resort to exploiting ethical or moral values that they place in the service of their business objective. In this case, it is not only about the use of ethical or moral values in the advertising approach, but also about the morality of such an approach. We will continue to address both situations, bringing examples from the Romanian and international media.

However, a clarification is needed regarding the terms “ethics” and “morals”, which are often used as synonyms. Ethics can be defined as a set of judgments centred on good and evil, embodied in ethical norms, their purpose being to guide human behaviour in order to seek and fulfil good; it has also a scientific character, the study objective being the morals for guidance and character formation. Ethics is a term broadly used, in a variety of contexts, at the level of a company but also at the level of a society and brings together a set of principles, rules or standards applicable to human or organizational behaviour in order to prevent inappropriate behaviour (e.g. theft, lying, violence, fraud, slander) and to encourage the actions useful to the society.

In turn, morality brings together a set of beliefs that individuals recognize and practice accordingly. Being moral does not mean that a person does exactly what he feels, but does what he knows is right or what his conscience dictates. Morality describes the rules or set of rules that govern our behaviour and that of those around us. Unlike ethical values, which are accepted at the level of larger groups of people, such as a community, a company, a nation, moral values may or may not be synchronized with those of society. An example of this is the subject of abortion, which in the past has been considered a wrongdoing, both morally and ethically. In the meantime, many countries have legalized this act, making it ethically correct. However, although it has been legalized, many people consider it a morally wrong act

[28]. The tension between ethics and morality is even more evident when a person has to conform or promote ethical values that contradict his morals.

Therefore, “ethics” refers to codes of conduct imposed by the society in which the individual lives; however, those codes can be considered immoral, but at a much deeper level, where the individual’s personal belief system is defined. As a consequence, advertising and marketing, while respecting a number of ethical principles, are increasingly at odds with morality in today’s society.

3. Promoting traditions or moral values through advertising

Advertising is not only the prerogative of organizations in the commercial field, but of those in the non-commercial sector, where the promotion of different types of causes (ecological, social, humanitarian, political) is done with the help of communication techniques already validated in the commercial field. Among these techniques, advertising is useful due to the mass character of the media, the possibility of transmitting an emotional dimension, especially important in raising awareness of the target audience and the repetitiveness of the message, able to ensure the retention and remembrance of promoted ideas. Marketing has taught us that the success of communication is all the greater as it combines more ways of communicating, so that in addition to advertising, specific public relations techniques are used, but also direct marketing.

There are countless campaigns conducted by non-profit associations and organizations using marketing communication techniques, and many of them build their message around ethical or moral values shared by the target population. These include, for example, pro-life campaigns in Romania and other countries, campaigns to protect the male and female family, and, most recently, pro-vaccination or coronavirus prevention 19 campaigns.

3.1. Pro-Life Campaigns

In Romania, one of the most active promoters of pro-life campaigns is the Pro Vita association, with a long tradition in post-December 89 Romania, being established since 2005 [3]. Among the values that this association aims to promote through its campaigns, including advertising campaign, we mention: “human life as a supreme value”, family, education as a means of development, and last but not least, Christian values.

As for pro-life campaigns, they stem from the mission to protect both the born and unborn child, which is why the association has consistently conducted outdoor and online campaigns on pro-life issues, especially awareness about the implications of abortion.

In its campaigns, Pro Vita made full use of advertising communication techniques, choosing mass media with lower costs (such as outdoor or online campaigns). The message chosen in the communication was also varied: from the presentation of statistical data on the very large number of abortions, to arguments of a moral nature arising from Christian values. Such a campaign, carried out in partnership with Toronto Right to Life (Canada) was entitled “Christmas without children” (figure 1) and was based on 4x3 and 5x4 panels and LED panels in the largest cities in Romania (Bucharest, Brasov, Cluj, Craiova, Constanta, Oradea, Ploiesti, Sibiu). Christmas, a holiday per excellence dedicated to the joy of the birth of the child Jesus Christ, becomes an opportunity to raise public awareness of the importance of life, the joy of the family, the protection of children. The chosen slogan (“De Crăciun, unele jucării vor avea mai puțini copii care să se joace cu ele” – “At Christmas, some toys will have fewer children to play with”) recalls the gap left by aborted children in the hearts of parents, but also in society.



Figure 1. Pro-life campaign by Pro Vita & Toronto Right to Life [5]

In the online environment, the number of pro-life campaigns is much higher, the messages being disseminated in partnership by several associations with the same stated goal. Among the most common forms we mention the movies posted on the You Tube channel, the messages on the Facebook pages of these associations, online advertising banners such as the one below, which

appeared on the Facebook page of the publication “Cultura Vietii”. Although directly addressed to gynaecologists (“Stimați ginecologi, Așa arată deseurile. Nu așa” – ‘Dear gynaecologists, this is how waste looks. Not so’) the visual difference between waste (from the basket) and a fetus, wants to strengthen the idea that “fetus” means a life, not an object.



Figure. 2. Pro-life advertising posted on Facebook [10]

3.2. Family Campaigns

Another aspect that is the subject of campaigns based on arguments of a moral nature, but also of tradition, is the one related to the family as a union between a man and a woman. The issue has grown in line with the tendency to legislate for same-sex civil unions, followed by the right to adopt children, a situation considered to be in contraction with Christian moral values. In Romania, these campaigns began in the context of a citizen’s initiative to revise the country’s Constitution, so that the current phrase that defines marriage as a union “between two spouses” is replaced by “union between a man and a woman”. The initiative was supported by a large number of associations, most of which later formed the “Coalitia pentru Familie” (“Coalition for the Family”). The campaigns aimed, in the first stage, to collect signatures for starting the process of revising the Constitution, in the second stage to raise awareness of the population and elected representatives on the need for a referendum on this issue, and in the last stage, after the organization of referendum was approved (for the period of October 6-7, 2018), mobilizing the population to participate in the referendum and vote in favor of the proposed revision.

An example of advertising material used by the Coalition for the Family to organize the referendum is the spot “3 million votes” which brings arguments related to the moral values and tradition of the Romanian people, represented by the 3 million signatures in favor of the referendum (Figure 3). The designs and colors used at the beginning of the spot are specific to Romanian folklore. The pro-referendum spot was broadcast on YouTube and Facebook page of the Coalition for the Family, being taken over by the member associations, as well as by other pro-family associations.



Figure 3. Pro-referendum spot broadcast by the Coalition for the Family [8]

As the referendum was organized amid strong political conflict between the main political forces in Parliament and the EU's recommendations not to encourage this, both pro-family and anti-referendum organizations have launched advocacy actions aimed at attracting population in one of the two camps.



Figure 4. Manifesto in support of the referendum posted on the Facebook page of the band "La Familia" on November 9, 2017 [14]

During the campaign for voting on the amendment of the Constitution, video spots, outdoor advertising, numerous printed materials (flyers, leaflets) were used, as well as statements of support from some personalities or opinion leaders of the Romanian society (singers, actors ..., a example being in Figure 4 with the promotion made through several media channels by Sișu and Puya, members of the Romanian hip-hop band "La Familia").

In essence, the message of the initiators of the referendum was based on tradition (hence the phrase that was associated with them, of defenders of the "traditional family") and moral values regarding the family. In this sense, the campaign was supported by all the monotheistic cults in Romania [20], not only by the Christian ones, the argument being the same: the Christian teaching considers blessed the family formed between a man and a women, as it was the one from Cana of Galilee; in the reference writing of Islam, namely the Qur'an and the Sunnah, the family is also defined as the union between a man and a women, the rights and obligations of both being clearly mentioned. Of course, in the development of the argument, especially on the profile sites and Facebook were explained biological, social, psychological reasons why children should grow up in families consisting of a man and women, not two spouses who could have the same sex [4]. These arguments were simultaneously taken up in synthetic advertising message, used in the public campaign. Moreover, one of the messages underlined the importance of the family for the

preservation and development of a people, the message being “The family is the foundation of the nation”).

3.3. Heroism in Advertising Campaigns

Overtime, there have been various movies, series or cartoons with heroes who were always ready to sacrifice themselves to save the situation, whether it was goods, values or people’s lives. Heroism is a moral value deeply rooted in the soul of people, which will never be lost, and which involves a personal sacrifice, for someone else, for a noble purpose or cause. In fact, the folklore of each country abounds in stories with heroes...

Nowadays, the idea of heroism has been adapted to be associated with various actions in which a person has made material or human efforts to support or save a situation, a cause, a life. In this context, cases of heroism become frequent and close, each being invited to make a gesture of “heroism”. A hero can be considered one of the parents, or even a family relative who dedicates his own resources to the good development and upbringing of the little ones, being an example for them and passing on true moral values, which in turn will be transferred from generation after generation.

In the context of the medical crisis caused by SARS-COV 2 epidemic, heroism has often been used as an argument for campaign messages designed to support various actions. A example from Romania is the 2020 campaign entitled “Donate plasma, be a hero! (#BeAHero)” [21], which aimed to donate plasma, mainly, but also blood, to people fighting the virus. Following the promotion of the campaign, both online and offline, those people who won the fight against the virus and wanted to give a helping hand to those affected by the disease and need plasma or blood were mobilized. The campaign included, in addition to impact images, focused on the idea of sacrifice (heroic) and a series of practical information on donation, eligibility conditions. A site dedicated to this goal was created under the auspices of students from Romanian universities and medical schools (www.donezasangefiierou.ro). However, the message was taken over and promoted on the Facebook pages of the branches of this association, as it is the case of the students from Iasi town, the poster having as slogan “Conditions to be a superhero” (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Online ad from the campaign “Donate blood, be a hero!” Scoph Public Health & Society of Medical Students Iași [18]

The idea of heroism was widely exploited during the pandemic, especially in prevention campaigns for children. The message was generally focused on the idea of adopting a certain preventive behaviour to avoid infecting others. In this context, children will be life-saving heroes in the fight against the virus. An example is the campaign of the Nouvelle-Aquitaine Regional Health Agency in France in which an imaginary character, with superhero qualities, teaches children rules of self-protection and protection of other from the covid 19 virus. Learning these rules will give each child super hero-like powers. The campaign used a series of posters (the “Super powers” poster, the “How to Wash Our Hand” poster, the “Misadventure of Coronavirus” poster, the “How to Wear Correctly the Mask” poster, a test for verification of knowledge, respectively testing of acquired superpowers) as well as communication on the dedicated web page [1].

4. The instrumentalization of ethical or moral values for the success of advertising campaign

In the case of organizations operating in the commercial field, the use of ethical or moral values in marketing communication is part of their social responsibility effort. The concern for responsible social marketing involves the inclusion in the company’s strategy of actions designed to support the environment and the society in which it operated [15]. According to the concept of social responsibility, each company can choose the behavior to use

in business, but it implies a responsibility in terms of society, the way of action is called ethical responsibility. This ethical responsibility is defined as a philosophical environment, in which decisions are made about what constitutes good or bad behavior, moral or immoral. At first glance it may be easy to apply, but in reality, it is very difficult to decide what is good or bad, many of decisions can be interpreted due to different opinions at the level of society. Differences in perception are most often determined by cultural factors, respectively by the cultural values that underline a community or society. Although many values evolve so that what was unethical in the past can now be socially accepted, moral values are harder to change. As a result, the choice of ethical or moral values as arguments in marketing communication can generate lively debates in society, even creating reactions opposite to those pursued by communication objectives.

An example of an advertising campaign focused on ethical values is the one carried out in Romania, in 2020, in the context of the medical crisis generated by the SARS-COV2 virus. Entitled “Support the Doctors“, the campaign was carried out by the advertising agency McCann Romania. The agency realized outdoor advertising posters, created by Wanda Hutira [6].

This campaign was based on billboards displayed in Bucharest, in which both doctors and nurses are represented, with objects specific to the profession and requirements for protection against the spread of the virus, but also with symbols taken from religion, especially from Eastern Christianity (Figure 6).





Figure 6. Images from the outdoor campaign "Support the Doctors" [22]

The aim of the campaign, as stated by the agency, was to highlight the efforts made by medical staff since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, to raise the morale of these people and to raise awareness among the entire population about the role of medical staff, but also to dedication with which he is in the service of his fellows.

However, the campaign generated lively debate, being disavowed by people from several professional categories (doctors, Orthodox Church representatives, journalist, actors...). Among the reasons that generated these disputes, the most frequently invoked in the public space are [19, 16]:

- Using the image of doctors or nurses presented with symbols of the saints in the Orthodox icons gives the impression that the medical staff has a soteriological role of saving, which goes beyond the real role of doctors, but also has a blasphemous connotation of Orthodox believers. In addition, doctors have saved and are saving lives not only in the context of the coronavirus epidemic, and their presentation only in association with this disease minimizes, in the opinion of some doctors, the role of their profession.
- Taking religious symbols from Orthodox icons (a character in a robe, cap, goggles, stethoscope and mask blesses with his right hand, following the model of the orthodox icon Pantocrator, while holding a medical observation sheet with his left hand) proves lack knowledge of their significance and ridicule ;
- The contradiction between the meaning of the symbols used : if in one image is used as a model Christ Pantocrator (ie Almighty, King

of the world), another image in which a nurse with several hands appears reminds of the god Shiva, creator and destroyer of the universe in Hindu mythology.

Following the controversy created in the public space, but also the request made by the Bucharest City Hall regarding the removal of billboards, McCann decided to withdraw the panels “approaching the religious universe”, and replace them with some that “pay homage to doctors – heroes without harming the faith of passers-by” [17].



Figure 7. Examples of images used in the Belgrade campaign [2, 23]

It should be noted that the same company McCann also carried out in Serbia a campaign aimed at highlighting the role of doctors in the context of the medical crisis. The images used in the Serbian campaign, however, used figures of people who keep track of the masks they wore for too many hours. The campaign in Belgrade was successful with the public because it did not use religious symbols, but was simply based on superheroes: on the faces of doctors were superimposed masks of superheroes known and loved by everyone as „Batman”, „Spider-Man” or „IronMan”.

Another campaign that involved the use of traditions is the one planned to take place in 2020 in the USA, by using Santa Claus as a vector to promote vaccination and its positive effects.

The campaign was to have a budget of about \$ 250 million, supported by the department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The actors who were to play the role of Santa Clause, his wife and the elves were to sign a contract to receive the vaccine against Covid-19 earlier, in exchange for their involvement in the vaccine promotion campaign [11]. Although more than 100 people had volunteered to participate in the campaign, it was stopped under the pretext of increasing the number of infections, but also as a result of accusations of using taxpayers’ money in a campaign that could have helped improve the image of President D. Trump [12]. Furthermore, Citizens for

Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) has pointed out that it is unethical to offer access to the vaccine to certain people in front of general public. [7].

Also in order to promote vaccination, but among children, Pfizer designed in 2021 an advertising campaign with a common message in communication to this age group, namely the idea of being a hero. The commercial features a series of children who are ready to become superheroes and who evoke a series of qualities of superheroes, called superpowers (courage, trying something new, the ability to save others, to aid, to help overcomes fear, etc.). This campaign also generated criticism as a result of the arguments used, but also of the obvious commercial interest of the promoting company [13].

A final example is the European information campaign aimed at supporting the availability of the covid vaccine to the general public. Thus, the use of religious symbols in communicating about the medical crisis has been practiced not only in the United States but also in Europe, where policymakers have deliberately created an association between the Christmas holiday and the arrival of the covid vaccine on the market. The Vice President of the European Commission, Margaritis Schinas stated, for example, adding to Ursula von der Leyen that “the vaccine will be a Christmas present for all citizens of our continent” [24] .



Figure 8. "Vaccination: an act of charity" – cover of a German Christmas magazine 2020 [25]

However, this association between religion and disease/treatment was not taken up in specially designed advertising campaigns, but only in news and political statements, as well as in visual media communication (e.g. Figure 8), in other words, in public information campaigns.

5. Conclusions

When designing and distributing advertising materials for profit, the traditions and benchmarks of the target group and the cultural environment in which the advertising campaign will be used must first be taken into account. Both a product and a promoted idea or cause may be welcome in one community and suffer in another, due to the different perceptions associated with the message received. “Ethics” refers to codes of conduct imposed by the society in which the individual lives; moreover, some of these ethical rules may even be considered immoral, at a much deeper level, where the personal belief system can be found, and companies should not enter into such a personal and sensitive space. Personal belief systems are called morals, and they differ from one individual to another, from one group to another.

The subject of this article aims to highlight how the use of advertising can benefit or, on the contrary, damage certain deep values, specific to the individual and his group. We have shown, through concrete examples, how advertising can use the moral values or traditions of a population in an attempt to persuade its target audience. These values can be used in a positive way to support the communication goals of advertisers. These are many values, of which we have chosen to detail the right to life (and life as a divine gift), the family as a union between a man and a woman, and thus accepted in the light of monotheistic religious beliefs, and the family as a basis for preservation and support of a people, heroism as the supreme gesture in the service of one’s neighbor and life. Campaigns aimed at promoting these values used advertising media (outdoor, web, social networking) and messages built on advertising principles.

In the last paragraph we presented another category of advertising campaigns, namely those that exploit the beliefs and values of the target audience, for objectives that are not directly related to ethical/moral values or traditions on which the advertising message is based, and the question is related to the ethics of such campaigns. The hostile reactions and debates arising from these campaigns make us understand how sensitive the religious

subject is, first and foremost, and the risks to which an advertiser who wants to build communication in this field is exposed.

The „Support the Doctors” campaign broadcast in Romania, in the midst of a health crisis, aimed, according to the initiators, to send a message of support to the doctors who worked in the wards with Coronavirus patients. The use of symbols of Eastern Christianity, combined with symbols from other religions, in a modernist advertising syncretism, however, created lively debate and widespread public rejection, as well as among doctors, which eventually led to the withdrawal of the outdoor panels. Of course, for the advertising company, McCann Romania, the campaign had the role of creating reputation around its brand, at the cost of harming religious sensibilities.

The second campaign took place in the USA and involved the use of a character associated with the Christmas holiday in a vaccine-related campaign. The idea was somewhat taken over in the European space, in public information campaigns, this time, the vaccine being presented as a substitute savior of the child Jesus, whose saving birth was being prepared to be celebrated by the old Christian continent.

Advertising is based on creativity, and in building the message it is natural to capitalize on those values that are important for the target audience, giving weight to the idea conveyed or facilitating its assimilation.

In a world where morality is being replaced by ethics, and ethical principles are evolving according to economic interests and goals, advertising plays a fairly important role in promoting new perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors in order to often change values. That is why advertising is also assigned a social function, along with the persuasive one.

We may be tempted to say that the fight is lost and that advertising, being the main prerogative of strong companies, will choose pecuniary values over moral ones. However, the existence of regulatory and self-regulatory bodies ensures that ethical principles, even if evolving over time, are ensured. On the other hand, the hope is that the same techniques will be used by those who want to promote certain moral values, as we have already shown. The preservation of traditional and moral values in the advertising landscape and, implicitly, in the community one, practically depends on the efficiency of their approach, but also on the freedom of expression and choice.

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