

Agency Practitioners' Perceptions of Professional Ethics in Taiwan

*Amber Wenling Chen
Jeanne Mei-Chyi Liu*

ABSTRACT. A survey was conducted on the advertising practitioners in Taiwan concerning their experiences of ethical challenges at work. Among 120 respondents, while 32.5 percent responded that ethical problems did not exist, 67.5 percent admitted that ethical problem was a commonplace at work. According to these respondents, the most frequently mentioned ethical problems area representing unethical products or services, the message of advertisements, agency-client relationship, the creditability of research, untimely rebate, and the quality of service. Suggestions for international advertising managers were also provided by comparing the finding from the present study with earlier studies in the United States. However, due to its preliminary nature, the present study should be considered exploratory and descriptive rather than conclusive, with the hope to inspire more research on advertising ethics in Taiwan as well as in other countries in the world.

Introduction

Members of all service professions who have nothing to sell but service (e.g., doctors, lawyers, etc.) are often confronted with situations posing ethical problems (Hunt and Chonko, 1987). Advertising practitioners, like other professionals, are repeatedly faced with the subject of ethical standards. Aaker and Day (1982), for example, reported that people perceive advertising as one of the most unethical areas in marketing, and 35

to 40 percent of the public believe that advertising is seriously misleading. Similarly, false or misleading advertising placed thirteenth among twenty-four ethical issues or problem areas in a 1988 survey of 2000 U.S. corporations conducted by the Ethics Resource Center in Washington (Thompson, 1990).

The materialistic and pervasive nature of advertising makes it a logical target for people who are concerned with business ethics. In fact, the debate over ethics of advertising has a considerably long history in the United States and has been scrutinized from a variety of perspectives. Historically, advertising has been criticized by humanities and social science scholars for its ubiquitousness, intrusiveness, and persuasiveness (see Pollay, 1986, for a review); therefore, quite a few researches have focused on how "the unintended consequences of advertising" (Pollay, 1986, p. 18) affect today's American society (e.g., Ewen, 1988; Clark, 1989; Thompson, 1990). Secondly, since advertising message is often an one-way communication, the underlying uncertainty of the information process of such message may leave it open to different interpretations of the same contents (Rotzoll et al., 1990; Christians et al., 1991). As a result, the psychoactive effects of advertising has become a popular research area in recent years (e.g., Crisp, 1987; LaTour and Zahra, 1989; Hyman and Tansey, 1990; Tansey et al., 1992). Finally, the lack of a credible third party (e.g., public interest groups, the Federal Trade Commission, etc.) supervising the operation of the commission system of advertising agencies (Zinkhan, 1994) leads to many inquiries on the ethics of advertising agencies for providing professional services (e.g., Bullard and Snizek, 1988; Stafford, 1988).

Amber Wenling Chen is an associate professor in the Department of Advertising at the National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan.

Jeanne Mei-Chyi Liu is an associate professor in the Department of Advertising at the National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan.

In summary, as long as ethical issues affect the practice of advertising business, advertising ethics will continue to present itself as a major challenge for scholars, marketers, and policy-makers.

However, the majority of the advertising ethics literature so far has focused exclusively on ethical issues in the United States (see Hyman et al., 1994, for a review). Many reasons account for why advertising ethics in a cross-cultural setting has rarely been studied. For example, while moral values may be similar across cultures, the application of ethics in specific situations varies (Wines and Napier, 1992). Another possible explanation may come from the fact that culture is a difficult subject to examine and understand either by itself or in relationship to management practices (Mooij and Keegan, 1991). Nevertheless, as the trend of international advertising is fast spreading in many countries worldwide, the understanding of advertising ethics from a cross-cultural perspective remains important and necessary.

The advertising industry in Taiwan has not become a modern and organized operation until the last 30 years. Yet, since the deregulation of foreign investment in advertising agency, the growth of this industry has gained increasing importance internationally. According to statistics compiled by the TAAA (Taipei Association of Advertising Agencies) in 1995, the total advertising expenditure in Taiwan was valued at US\$3.05 billion, placing Taiwan as the world's 15th largest advertising nation. In addition, most of the full service advertising agencies in Taiwan have western affiliations and thus acquired those international clients of their partners. As rapidly as the industry is growing, nevertheless, little research attention has been given to the practice so far. The objectives of the present study, therefore, are 1) to collect information from advertising practitioners in Taiwan regarding ethical problems they are confronting with in daily practices, and 2) to provide some suggestions for international advertising managers in selecting and applying moral values in their daily decision making by comparing findings of the present study with earlier studies in the United States.

Theoretical background

Ethics is an ambiguous term that has been defined in many different ways. Anthropologists, for example, define ethics as inquiry into the nature and grounds of morality where the morality means moral judgments, standards, and rules of conduct (Taylor, 1975). Social psychologists, in contrast, viewed morality as the practical activity that governs human conduct in a given situation and ethics is the activity of applying moral precepts to concrete problems (Churchill, 1982). More recently, Wines and Napier (1992) proposed a definition of ethics from a cross-cultural perspective. They argued that ethics involves analytical, rational, and cognitive processes and moral codes are the comprehensive and abstract ethical principles that govern modes of conduct in a specific cultural setting (Wines and Napier, 1992).

The term "advertising ethics" has also been perceived as an abstract, complex, and situational construct in prior literature (Bush, 1994). Calkins (1930), for example, believed that advertising ethics comprises many details, but broadly speaking, its objective is to preserve the advertiser's faith in advertising as a means of selling goods, the belief in agents as business advisers, and the confidence of the public in the integrity of advertising as a guide in the purchase of goods. Bishop (1949) suggested that ethical standard for advertising should be utilitarian; that is, such standard should "meet the practical requirements of society at a given stage of development" (p. 88). Later, Leiser (1978) divided the concept of advertising ethics into four major areas of concern: the nature of the product being advertised, the person to whom the ad is addressed, the impact upon persons who are likely to be indirectly affected by the advertisement, and the substance of the advertisement itself.

A variety of research methods have been employed to approach advertising ethics from different angles. These approaches include content analysis (e.g., Hyman, Tansey and Clark, 1994; Bol et al., 1993), experiments (e.g., LaTour and Henthorne, 1994; Tinkham and Weaver-Lariscy, 1994), survey on consumers (e.g., LaTour and Henthorne, 1994; Fraedirch et al., 1989),

survey on academic people (e.g., Hyman et al., 1994) and more. The most commonly employed approach, however, is the examination on the perceived ethical practices of advertising professionals.

Prior literature indicated that there are at least two ethical systems confronting advertising practitioners. The first type of ethical system comprises formal principles embodied in a host of codes and guidelines (Christians et al., 1991). One of the earliest guidelines on advertising ethics came from the eighth annual convention of the American Association of Advertising Agencies held at Chicago, October 16, 1924. In this meeting, Calkins proposed a code of ethics known as "Standards of Practice." Later, the American Advertising Federation and its predecessor have offered a set of 39-point code of ethics for advertising in 1942, with a recent revision in 1984. Unfortunately, similar advertising codes or guidelines have not yet been fully developed in the current business environment in Taiwan (Liu et al., 1992).

The other type of ethical system relates to the personal criteria of individuals who frequently confront ethical decisions (Christians et al., 1991). Based on this perspective, prior literature has focused either on how an individual acquires and uses moral philosophies in business decisions (e.g., Rotzoll and Christians, 1980; Krugman and Ferrell, 1981; Hunt and Chonko, 1987) or on developing a framework or a model that captures the interaction of the moral philosophies, individual characteristics, organizational culture, and greater social/economic environment that contribute to ethical decision making (e.g., Ferrell and Gresham, 1985; Ferrell, Gresham and Fraedrich, 1989; Hunt and Vitell, 1986). The present study focuses on how advertising practitioners in Taiwan define ethical issues in their working environment and how these ethical issues affect their practice of professions.

This study can further be viewed as a natural follow-up of two prior studies in the United States (Rotzoll and Christians, 1980; Hunt and Chonko, 1987). In Rotzoll and Christian's (1980) study, open-ended questions are used to examine ethical standards from the perspective of 123 advertising agency executives. According to their

study, the first set of ethical problems reported by the respondents dealt with the advertising message which included: "what should be advertised?" "how should the message be crafted?" and "where does the ethical decision-making reside?" The second set of ethical problem, on the other hand, was related to the agency/client relationship which concerned "serving the clients," "billing practices," and "confidentiality". The limitation of this study, however, were that only of four advertising agencies were surveyed and the respondents contained an unidentified number of clerical workers.

In comparison, Hunt and Chonko's (1987) study surveyed a broader range of advertising agencies with 269 executive responding to the open-ended questionnaire. Higher-level positions was heavily focused upon within those agencies. According to their study, the most frequently cited ethical problems among advertising agency executives, in ranked order, were "treating clients fairly," "creating honest, non misleading and socially desirable advertisements," "representing clients whose products/services are unhealthy, unneeded, useless, or unethical," "treating suppliers, vendors and media fairly," "treating employees and management of agencies fairly," and "treating other agencies fairly."

Methodology

Questionnaire development

A three-part semistructured questionnaire which combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to extract richer meanings and interpretations was used to collect relevant information for the present study.

The first part of the questionnaire consists of a few open-ended questions regarding ethically questionable situations in the advertising practice in Taiwan. Open-ended format was deliberately used in this part so the respondents would have maximum freedom in relating their own perceptions of ethical standards. The question begins with, "Have you ever encountered any ethical problem in your daily work?" If the respondent answered "no", he or she would be asked to

further explain why. If the respondents answered "yes", he or she would be asked to describe, in a paragraph or two, the types of ethically involved situations in which they felt advertising practitioners in Taiwan typically encountered.

Those who answered "yes" to the first question were also required to fill out the second part of the questionnaire, which was designed to elicit information regarding how frequently ethical problems occur in their current professions as well as to what extent do these problems affect their work. The third and final section of the questionnaire was demographic information.

Data-gathering procedures

The unit of analysis for the present study were members of all full-service advertising agencies in Taiwan with advertising billings exceeding NTD (New Taiwanese Dollar) 100 million in 1992. According to the TAAA, 30 agencies met the above criterion at the time, and the total number of employees in these agencies was about 1500 excluding clerical workers. A total of 350 mail questionnaires were sent to all 30 agencies with a cover letter urging cooperation while noting the voluntary nature of the project. The number of questionnaires sent to each agency was determined based on the ratio of that agency's number of employees to the total sample population. Completed questionnaires were mailed directly to the authors by the employees with anonymity assured. In addition to the mail delivery of questionnaires, a convenience sample of employees of these agencies was reached via personal contact by university students of advertising major. In summary, a total of 120 effective questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 34.3 percent, which was higher than expected.

Information regarding various ethically involved situations were coded into categories by the two authors. A 0.92 coefficient of agreement (the total number of agreements divided by the total number of coding decisions) was yielded, which exceeded the general satisfying level of reliability (0.85). Since the chosen category scheme may enhance or diminish the likelihood

of validity (Holsti, 1969), the previously established categories presented by Rotzoll and Christians (1980) and Hunt and Chonko (1987) were used as a reference scheme for the present study. However, as these categories do not reflect Taiwan's current situations precisely enough, some new categories have been added to maintain this study's validity.

Data from the rest part of the questionnaire were analyzed using the SPSS statistical package. Frequency counts were run on all variables to exclude any missing values. Additionally, cross tabulations and chi-square were calculated to determine if a relationship existed between variables. To test the strength of the relationship, Pearson's correlations were used and probabilities of 0.15 were considered significant.

Summary of findings

Sample profile

Table I lists a demographic profile of all respondents. Among 120 respondents, 52.5 percent were male and 47.5 percent were female. Regarding job allocation, 49.2 percent of the respondents were from account service, 26.7 percent were from creativity, 13.3 percent were from media, and 10.8 percent were from research. In terms of level of position, 10.8 percent of the respondents were of top management (held a title of executive V.P., senior V.P., or general manager), 18.3 percent were of middle level management (held a title of director or manager), 25 percent were of low level management (held a title of assistant or associate director), and 45.8 percent were non-management professional (held a title of assistant or associate director). Table I also shows that the respondents represented a wide range of years of advertising practicing experience from less than one year to over 15 years. Fortunately, this sample distribution corresponded well with the demographic statistics provided by TAAA. Thus, we concluded that our diverse sample of practitioners can provide a meaningful set of opportunities for research on advertising ethics in Taiwan.

Before discussing ethical issues confronted by

TABLE I
Demographics of the respondents (N = 120)

Category	Number of respondents	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	63	52.5%
Female	57	47.5%
<i>Department</i>		
Creativity	32	26.7%
Media	16	13.3%
Account service	59	49.2%
Research	13	10.8%
<i>Job title</i>		
Top management	13	10.8%
Upper-middle management	22	18.3%
Lower-middle management	30	25.0%
Nonmanagement	55	45.8%
<i>Years in advertising</i>		
Over 15 years	5	4.2%
10 to 15 years	17	14.1%
5 to 10 years	29	24.2%
1 to 5 years	57	47.5%
Less than one year	12	10.0%

discipline themselves from any questionable decision. A few respondents admitted that, although there might be ethical problem in advertising practices, they had not yet encountered any due to their short advertising experience. Interestingly, there were two respondents argued that advertising itself is a puffery business, and thus, a little bit of exaggeration was permissible and would not be considered unethical.

Reported ethical problems

Table II lists major categories of ethical problems, ranked order by frequency of mentions, confronting the 120 advertising practitioners in Taiwan. Four groupings that best represent a variety of answers from the respondents are discussed here. They are product-related, message-related, client/agency relationship-related, and service-related ethical problems.

(1) *Product-related ethical problems.* The most frequently cited ethical issue confronting the advertising practitioners in Taiwan, with 32 responses, was representing clients whose products or services are "unhealthy," "unneded," "useless," or "unethical." Among various clients,

TABLE II
Ethnical problems reported advertising practitioners in Taiwan (N = 81)

Rank	Problem area	Number of respondents
1	Representing clients whose products/services are unhealthy, unneeded, useflls, or unethical	32
2	Creating honest, nonmisleading, socially desirable advertisements	23
3	The agency/clients/media relationship conflicts	13
4	Providing honest research	7
4	Billing practices	7
4	Poor quality service	7
5	Accepting rebates from suppliers	6
6	Keeping clients' secrets	3
7	Others	2

Taiwan's advertising practitioners, it should be noted that 32.5 percent of the total respondents reported that they had hardly encountered any ethical problems. Some respondents, for example, claimed that the agencies they worked for held a high ethical standard with regard to selecting as well as servicing clients which had prevented them from facing with ethnic problem. Somewhat similar to the this perspective was that a few respondents believed that in a well-functioning professional advertising agency, unethical situations simply could not exist. One respondent mentioned that the Fair Trade Regulation, which was enacted in February 1992 in Taiwan, had successfully limited unethical conduct from arising in advertising business. Several respondents believed that most advertising professionals in Taiwan, like themselves, hold a high moral standard, which may be even higher than that of other professions and thus would

tobacco, real estate, medicine, liquor, stock brokers, instant noodles, government projects and fashion furriers were mentioned most frequently by the respondents as posing ethical considerations.

No political campaigns were mentioned, however. This may be due to the fact that political television advertising was not allowed on the mass media until late 1992 in Taiwan. Another interesting finding is that one respondent reported that helping one of his clients to develop a public service campaign bothered him because he felt that this client was not really interested in public welfare but profited from the better image the ads provided.

(2) *Message-related ethical problems.* The next frequently mentioned ethical problematic area, with 23 responses, involved a desire of advertising professionals to create honest and non-misleading advertisements. Quite a few respondents, for example, complained that clients asked them to fabricate "non-existing" product benefits in the ads. Similarly, a few respondents felt uncomfortable when clients asked them to include information of certain lower-price items in the ads to attract retail visits. According to their experiences, consumers usually would discover that these lower-price items were either "out of stock" or "sold out" when they actually visited the retailers. Several respondents mentioned that purposely withholding certain product-related information from the consumers in the ads made them feel guilty. Furthermore, the appropriation of using sex appeal was also brought up by two creative people.

(3) *Client/Agency relationship-related ethical problems.* Ethical issues related to balancing the needs of clients against the interests of agencies predominated this category with 13 respondents. Several respondents mentioned that in order to increase the agency's profit, they had to persuade their clients to spend money on extra media purchase without considering the clients' best interest. Similarly, a few respondents also admitted that they had kept certain information, especially these information related to media buying, away from the clients. A few respondents

pointed out that the agencies they worked for tended to pay less attention to clients with small budgets and/or allocate little resources on small accounts. The remaining ethical problems related to this aspect were the illegal use of visual images or photos without paying the copyright and using the agency's facility for personal purposes.

(4) *Service-related ethical problems.* The billing issue was mentioned by seven respondents as another area posing ethical problems in their daily practices. A media director complained that the agency she worked for never took clients' true benefit (e.g., cost-efficiency of media purchasing) into consideration. In addition, one account manager and one media planner both admitted that they had to come up with a higher billing statement for the clients at the request of the agency's top level management.

The reliability of research results was another frequently mentioned ethical issue. One respondent from the research department said that account people in the agency once asked her to change the research results to be in favor of clients' products. However, she refused to do so. One respondent admitted that he had to make up statistics to meet agency or clients needs. Similarly, another respondent stated that sometimes he was asked by the top management in the agency to skip negative information purposely while presenting result to the clients. In addition, one respondent said that she told the interviewees that she was doing academic research for non-profit organizations in order to collect competitive information.

Media and account people accepting rebates from media or other suppliers has long been a problem in the advertising business in Taiwan. Two respondents felt that taking rebates was not the right thing to do, yet ". . . since everybody does it, why shouldn't I?" Two respondents admitted that they quitted their jobs because they did not want to take rebates like the rest. Fortunately, they were able to find other agencies that met their ethical standards in this aspect. Poor quality of service was another focus of ethical problems. Several respondents mentioned that they often had to convince their clients to accept ads with poor execution quality due to

the time pressures. Another respondent stated that what bothered him the most was whether or not he had given his clients their money's worth of effort. One respondent complained that some creative people treated advertising campaigns as creative experiments or self-actualized tools without really taking the client's need into account.

The need to protect clients' secrets was also mentioned by a few respondents. For example, one respondent said that he had to be very careful not to talk about clients' new products in front of his friends who worked for other agencies. Another respondent complained that a few advertising practitioners in Taiwan would use client's information as chips in their job hunting.

Frequency and impact

When the respondents were asked how frequently any of the above ethical problems happened in their current daily practices, among 81 respondents, 3.7 percent replied "never", 28.4 percent replied "sometimes", 18.5 percent replied "constantly," and 49.4 percent replied "very often." However, when these respondents were asked to what extent these ethical problems affected their work, a fairly large percentage (48.1 percent) answered "no effect at all," 26 percent answered "affect a little," 18.5 percent answered "somewhat effects," and only 7.4 percent answered "greatly affected." These findings indicate that although many advertising practitioners in Taiwan were aware of ethical problems in their daily work, most of the respondents did not consider these ethical problems as a major issue that could affect their professions.

It is also worth noticing that respondents with higher level positions in the agency mentioned less ethical problems than respondents with lower level positions ($\chi^2 = 24.63; P \leq .15$). Similarly, respondents with higher level positions in the agency also felt less affected by ethical problems than respondents with lower level positions ($\chi^2 = 23.07; P \leq 0.15$).

Discussion

A comparison between U.S. and Taiwan

Quite a few recommendations to international advertisers can be provided by comparing the differences between the present study and the findings from the previous studies conducted in the United States. However, due to the fact that practitioners in both countries face different economic and social situations, various demographic and social variables in the U.S. as well as in Taiwan should be taken into consideration while interpreting such comparisons.

Several ethical problems, such as representing unethical products or services, creating an honest message, conflicts between agency and client, and billing practices were ethical issues confronted by advertising practitioners both in the United States and in Taiwan. However, ethical problems related to the relationship between the agency and its vendors, media, or competitors were not mentioned by Taiwanese advertising practitioners at all. This might reflect the fact that vendors and media in Taiwan are still considered to be subsidiaries of agencies and are not treated as counterparts of agencies. Also, the fact that "treating employees and management of agencies fairly" was not mentioned as an ethical problem in the present study could be a reflection of the Taiwanese management style which seldom emphasizes employee satisfaction.

On the other hand, "providing honest research results," "poor quality services," and "taking rebates from suppliers" are some unique problems that appear to exist only in the current advertising environment in Taiwan. In fact, these responses may reflect some reality in the advertising business in Taiwan. For example, "providing honest research results" was commonly mentioned as an ethical problem may be due to the fact that the value of conducting systematic research has not yet been well recognized either by advertising agencies nor by clients in Taiwan.

In addition, among the 120 respondents in the present study, there were only 67.5 percent reported that ethical problems existed in the advertising business in Taiwan. This finding may be caused by many factors. For example, it could

reflect that there was a harmonious ethical environment in the business so that ethical problems do not surface (Hunt and Chonko, 1987). In other words, ethical problems are not critical factors within the advertising business in Taiwan. Alternatively, it may as well be due to a simple unwillingness of the respondents to share their perceptions relating ethics with the public because of a conservative tradition in Chinese society.

Suggestions and limitations

Scholars and practitioners in advertising often wonder where ethical consciousness of advertising comes from and who should be responsible for ethical education in advertising. In the United States, there are at least thirty books, two scholarly journals, and a half-dozen academic research centers that are devoted to business ethics (Stankey, 1989). In addition, in the past decade, participation in workshops, training seminars, and academic research on ethical dilemmas in marketing has increased and the interest in teaching business ethics in the classroom is also growing (Treise, 1994). In contrast, there are only one or two ethics related classes in the advertising departments at the university level in Taiwan. While many on-the-job training and short-term advertising professional courses provided by the agencies in Taiwan have become popular, advertising ethics have never been included as part of these trainings. Thus, as Taiwan has evolved into a developed country, more ethical related courses are recommended to be provided in schools as well by industry in the future.

This study is not without its limitations. The first limitation stems from the methodology employed in this study. Ideally, a random probability sampling would be most suitable for investigating this subject. However, due to the fact that ethics has long been a sensitive issue to the top management in the advertising agencies in Taiwan, a supplemental convenience sampling was added into the present study in order to gain perspective from different angles. Secondly, the interpretations offered in this study are necessarily limited in depth, magnitude, and context

by the characteristics of the persons who contributed to the study. Although the 120 respondents were carefully selected to present a wide and varied range of experience, the data is not representative of the population in any statistical sense. In other words, the findings from this study are not necessarily generalize to other places or people.

Nevertheless, this study can be viewed as a "first step" toward the understanding of advertising ethics among practitioners in Taiwan. While this study offers only a developmental framework, future research attempt to expand on this conceptualization. For example, as Zinkhan (1994) pointed out, advertising researchers who develop improved measures will make a major contribution to the literature on advertising ethics. Therefore, the development of a theoretic and psychometric scale for measuring cross-cultural advertising ethics based on empirical testing of some of the theoretical constructs, with satisfying standards of reliability and validity, is definitely advisable. In addition, in order to better understand the moral issues in different cultural settings as the trend of international advertising is fast spreading in many countries worldwide, research on advertising ethics in other countries or areas are also suggested.

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National Chengchi University,
Advertising Department Office,
Taipei,
Taiwan R.O.C.
E-mail: wlchen@cc.nccu.edu.tw