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Responsible Advertising in Haiti

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Abstract

Responsible Advertising in Haiti

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Haiti's advertising industry has sparked a lot of controversies within the nation in the past few years for its violations of ethics and disregard for the level of sophistication of its audience in its messages. At the local level, no legislation is set in place to protect this vulnerable population which, for the vast majority, is illiterate. Developed countries have established rules and legislation that protect consumers, particularly vulnerable consumers, from advertising's potential harm. Little attention has been given to populations in developing countries, such as Haiti, where there is no control or regulation of advertising. In this paper, the author takes a look at the characteristics of the Haitian population and draws on examples from the local press and her direct experience as a professional in the field in order to illustrate the controversy that surrounds advertising in that country. The goal is to highlight the need for local practitioners to work towards industry guidelines that will allow for more responsible advertising in the country.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Relevant Literature.....	3
What exactly is responsible advertising?.....	7
What does consumer vulnerability mean?.....	9
Haiti	12
Demographics.....	12
The advertising market	13
Concerns about the advertising field in Haiti	16
The low literacy rate and advertising.....	16
Deception and Exaggerations.....	18
Advertising controversies in the Haitian press.....	22
Stereotyping and Norm-setting	22
Importance of language to clear, truthful messages	24
Misleading Messages.....	27
Discussion.....	29
Future Research.....	34
Segmentation.....	34
Advertising and Children.....	35
Conclusion	37
References.....	39

Introduction

The advertising industry is often under attack for its use of strong and powerful tactics, which are often thought to have a negative impact on society. Such criticism has led to many debates concerning the power advertising messages have to shape society or, perhaps more critical, to harm it. Advertisers have been more recently criticized for targeting disadvantaged or vulnerable populations with not only controversial and confusing messages, but also with ads for potentially harmful products.

Smith and Copper-Martin raised concerns about the “ethics of targeting vulnerable consumers with harmful products,” (1997) quoting other scholars who believe marketers should “have respect and concern for the welfare of those affected by their decisions” (Smith & Copper-Martin, 1997, p.1). In *The Distorted Mirror*, Pollay took that debate a step further by pointing out that, because it is their craft, advertisers are well-suited to evaluate the potential impact of their work on society but often neglect the topic. Advertisers tend to focus only on “advertising’s practical consequence, sales promotions,” when in fact “advertising is seen as having profound consequences” (Pollay, 1986 pp. 19-21).

This type of criticism has led to the adoption of legislation in many countries to protect certain population segments that are considered vulnerable to advertising’s tactics. However, this type of legislation of advertising does not exist everywhere. As a result, some of the most vulnerable populations around the world, including the people of Haiti, are not always protected. A guest writer featured in Haiti’s leading newspaper, *Le Nouvelliste*, raised concerns about the impact of advertising on the

Haitian society, and brought up the thorny issue of who is responsible for looking out for the Haitian population (Visene, 2011).

This paper takes a look at the characteristics of the Haitian population and draws on examples of the controversy surrounding the field in the country so as to highlight the need for a more responsible advertising field in Haiti. Instances of ethical violations found in the local press and real-life examples based on my direct experience as an advertising practitioner working in Haiti will be used to argue that there is a need to move towards a more responsible and regulated form of advertising in Haiti. Advertising regulations and governing bodies from other countries will be referenced to provide a proposed framework relying on the idea that the industry should enact guidelines and even consider the idea of self-regulation. The perspective is that, due the lack of legislation and low literacy rate, the vast majority of the Haitian populations is vulnerable. As a consequence, advertisers should make the population's welfare their priority by creating ads with a "sense of responsibility to consumers" (Hyman, 2009, p. 201).

Relevant Literature

For years scholars have raised concerns about advertising and its societal impact. Many have criticized it for its strong convincing power that not only makes it pervasive but also often leads to irrational consumer decisions, deception, or problematic norms and stereotypes (Bouch, Friestad & Wright, 2009; Pollay, 1986; Preston, 1998). The field is also often under attack for some of the tactics used including puffery, which is defined as “advertising or other sales representations which praise the item to be sold with subjective opinions, superlatives or exaggerations, vaguely and generally, stating no specific facts” (Preston, 1975, p. 17). As early as 1975, Preston, who is credited for being the first one to sharply condemn puffery in his book *The Great American Blow-Up: Puffery in Advertising and Selling*, was arguing that puffery is “a deceptive trade practice within the meaning of the FTC Act.” His argument was that puffery, which is legally accepted because it is not perceived as being a form of deception and is therefore considered harmless, should actually be regulated because it is a form of deception (Preston, 1975). Differing opinions surround the use of exaggerations in the field and its acceptance by the FTC, however. Just like Preston, some see it as being deceptive, and others argue that it is a necessary means for the field to fulfill its advertising role (Richards, 1990).

These debates surrounding the field are also often linked to debates about ethics in advertising, a term which is often confused with the law. The common assumption is that if something is not illegal, then it must be ethical, for otherwise it would not be legally accepted. Such an assumption is faulty, however. In “Advertising Ethics: A

multi-level approach,” Drumwright emphasizes the importance of separating these two terms so as to overcome this popular confusion that leads many to perceive law and ethics as having the same meaning (2003).

Drawing on Cunningham, the author defines ethics as “what is right and good in the conduct of the advertising function,” and asserts that ethics is concerned with “questions of what ought to be done, not just what legally must be done.” Based on that definition, she proposes a framework which relies on three levels identified as follows: micro, meso and macro-level issues (Drumwright, 2003, pp. 401 - 402). The author provides an overview of the ethical issues related to the field, touching on some of the aspects the field has been criticized for. These levels are worth looking at more closely as they bring more to the debate about not just advertising ethics but the potential impact of advertising on society as well.

Micro-level issues are concerned with “a more individual level – individual consumers, individual advertising practitioners, individual ads or campaigns, and specific advertising practices” (Drumwright, 2003, p. 400). In this level, the author evaluates whether or not the tactics advertisers use, including but not limited to puffery, unidentified sponsors and controversial messaging, within their messages are unethical, and takes the products, media characteristics, and practitioners’ behavior into consideration as well. The meso-level, proposed by the author to compensate for the lack of attention given to the “organizational culture of advertising agencies” (Drumwright, 2003, p. 401), moves beyond the individual to deal with an organization or groups of organizations. It addresses the way in which ethical decision-making happens within many institutions. This level looks at the internal structure of various organizations so as

to identify whether or not the “climate, culture, systems, policies and procedures [...] encourage individuals to be ethically sensitive” (Drumwright, 2003, p. 411). Finally, the macro-level focuses on the “aggregate effects of advertising,” otherwise known as “advertising’s unintended social consequences” (Drumwright, 2003, p. 408). This particular level addresses three categories: 1) promotion of materialism 2) reinforcement of stereotypes and 3) creation of false values. The second category related to the reinforcement of stereotypes that can become problematic is particularly worth addressing as it touches on the controversial issue of whether advertising shapes society or simply mirrors it, a topic that is relevant in the context of vulnerable populations.

A topic that can spark controversy at all three levels is the topic of consumer vulnerability, a topic which is also often linked to ethics. Advertising’s practice of targeting vulnerable populations is a topic that is constantly under attack, particularly when it comes to marketing potentially harmful products to those who are considered to be a part of disadvantaged market segments. Most of the works focused on vulnerabilities do so based on the idea of target marketing, and focus on key population segments that most commonly include children, the elderly and low-income population groups (“Advertising to Kids”, 2011; Hill, 2008; Laczniak & Murphy, 1993). Previous works in the area have looked at harmful products such as cigarettes, alcoholic beverages to minorities or disadvantaged groups, and, in most recent years, targeting children with treats (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997; Childs, 2012).

Little attention has been given to populations in developing countries who face educational limitations that might increase their vulnerabilities. Even when papers that address education and advertising do exist, it is difficult to find one that deals with

populations living in developing countries, as most of the work related to the field typically focuses on developed countries (Menzel Baker, Gentry & Rittenburg, 2005; Wallendorf, 2005).

A well-known case related to the vulnerabilities of populations living in emerging countries is the 1997 Nestle infant milk formula scandal during which the company was accused of “getting third world mothers hooked on formula.” Nestle’s advertising tactics in these parts of the world were scrutinized and attacked; the company was said to rely too heavily on pamphlet and sample distributions to mothers via “nurses in uniform (sometimes qualified, sometimes not).” At the time research in developed countries was focused on proving the health benefits of breastfeeding (Krasny, 2012). The code that resulted, The International Code of Marketing Breast-Milk Substitutes, created in 1981, was directly linked to the infant milk product category only (Krasny, 2012). This code addressed the risks associated with advertising this type of harmful products in third world countries, but, it did not address the broader issue related to how the limitations faced by populations in developing countries may impact the understanding of advertising and its tactics.

The extracted research provides evidence of an increased concern about advertising’s societal impact, concerns that become increasingly important to address when dealing with vulnerable populations as some of the mentioned literature outline. However, more attention should be given to the topic as it relates to a developing country like Haiti. An analysis of Haiti’s vulnerabilities and of objectionable advertising practices is necessary.

The following section will define two key terms used throughout the paper. These terms are “responsible advertising” and “consumer vulnerability.”

WHAT EXACTLY IS RESPONSIBLE ADVERTISING?

The most common practice today is to directly link the term responsible advertising to the idea of socially responsible advertising. Socially responsible advertising, however, refers to obligations to society, and is often translated as corporate social responsibility (Berger, Cunningham & Drumwright, 2007, p.133). The term is for the most part associated with the claim that business has “a responsibility to help ameliorate many of [the problems associated with, for example, extreme poverty and hunger, child mortality and HIV/AIDS]” (Smith, Bhattacharya, Vogel & Levine, 2010, p.1). As an example, in recent years, corporate social responsibility for advertising agencies has mostly taken the form of either pro-bono work or the promotion of sustainable consumption in developed countries.

This definition of responsible advertising may be accurate, but it is inadequate as it limits its scope, making it difficult to tie it to the particular topic of market vulnerabilities. It only deals with the additional work corporations can do to help address world issues and, therefore, does not acknowledge the possibility of unintended consequences of the core activities of these organizations. It should, therefore, be noted that this term is used throughout the paper keeping in mind Hyman’s *Responsible Ads: A Workable Ideal* in which the author suggests that “ads from even the most conscientious advertisers can trigger unintended negative consequences.” The author suggests that responsible advertising should therefore go beyond simply defining responsible people as

those who carefully “evaluate and weigh consequences properly, especially the benefits and harms to others” (Hyman, 2008, pp. 200-202). Overall Hyman proposes that responsible advertisers should exhibit a higher sense of responsibility with their craft. This sense of responsibility is manifested through an avoidance of ads that could impact long-run social welfare and that could potentially disrespect consumer intelligence (2008).

Ethical advertising focuses on advertising’s intended consequences by calling on advertisers’ sense of duty to do right by society, a duty which is translated through a commitment to what ought to be done (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009, p. 83). However, responsible advertising, as described by Hyman, goes even further to include a commitment to take into account the differences and characteristics of each targeted group. It takes one step further by taking into account the possibility of unintended consequences caused by such differences and characteristics. Responsible advertising should inform in a meaningful way without ignoring the level of sophistication of a given audience or relying on methods that may potentially impede adequate interpretation of a given message (Hyman, 2008). It should, however, be noted that such a commitment to responsible advertising is still in line with the idea of upholding integrity in advertising by creating honest, ethical advertising that presents the products it sells in a fair and accurate manner. It is rooted in a higher concern for the direct welfare of consumers, concerns that are directly linked to ethical, moral, and civic values. Responsible advertising does not call on advertisers’ sense of ethics only; it also includes the need for advertisers to commit to create ads that are clear so as to avoid misinterpretations, and to

refrain from exploiting consumers' disadvantages through "information overload" (Hyman 2008, p. 199).

It should therefore be noted that the term "responsible advertising" is being used intentionally in lieu of the term "advertising ethics" in this paper to suggest a commitment to do right by consumers not only by pledging not to harm them, as is prescribed by advertising ethics, but also by taking into account their particular characteristics, which in Haiti's case is that of the population's vulnerabilities, so as to create meaningful messages.

WHAT DOES CONSUMER VULNERABILITY MEAN?

The term "consumer vulnerability" suffers from a lack of a clear definition; it is, however, often defined with the "implication that some categories of people, because of membership in a defined class, are *always* vulnerable" (Baker, Gentry & Rittenburg, 2012, p.128). Smith and Cooper-Martin further define vulnerability as "a demographic characteristic generally perceived to limit the consumer's ability to maximize utility and well-being" (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997, p.6), the demographic factors in question being race and education.

The term as used in developed countries most commonly designates children (Pollay, 1993), the elderly (Benet, Pitts & Latour, 1993), and certain ethnic minorities. When used in one of these contexts, the term typically designates vulnerabilities consumers belonging to these groups face when they are exposed to harmful products. The argument is that, because of a given demographic factor, which can be age, race, education, ethnicity, or income level, groups have limited critical abilities. This limited

ability to think critically makes them more susceptible to being harmed by certain products (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997). Such a definition is at the basis of the many controversies that surround the advertising of certain products, including tobacco and alcohol.

While the commonly accepted definition mentions groups of people with limited critical abilities, it is not necessarily the only problem that is applicable to the Haitian market. This is particularly true given the fact that, as mentioned above, in developed countries, the term is usually used to refer to the negative impact of harmful products on such groups only. Baker, Gentry & Rittenburg acknowledge the limitations of this definition. They argue that consumer vulnerability is “multidimensional [and] context specific” (Baker, Gentry & Rittenburg, 2012, p. 128). It cannot, therefore, be only linked to harmful products.

Perhaps it is important that we remember the definition of the word vulnerability, which refers to “a susceptibility to injury or to being taken advantage of by another person” (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997, p. 4). In the advertising context, other elements, including tactics used by advertisers, should come into play to identify the elements that contribute to the vulnerabilities of certain markets. These elements are particularly important when referring to developing markets where a vast majority of the population does not necessarily have adequate knowledge of the ploys used in ads because of their lack of familiarity with advertising, as this paper will seek to illustrate in reference to the Haitian market.

The term “consumer vulnerability” as used in this paper is therefore used to refer to not only consumers’ vulnerabilities to potentially harmful products, but also to the

various advertising tactics that populations facing personal limitations, such as a lack of education or limited knowledge of a language, are exposed to. The setbacks they face turn them into vulnerable consumers because of their inability to identify advertising's powerful tools. As a consequence, these audiences become vulnerable to the potential abuse of incautious and irresponsible advertisers.

Haiti

The following section provides a short description of Haiti's population and advertising landscape, insights which are necessary to highlight the importance of the topic. The demographic data gathered through secondary research of Haiti's census data is necessary to better understand the disadvantages the population faces and how these disadvantages can impact their interaction with advertising. Given that advertising is at the core of the topic, background information is also provided about the state of advertising in the country today. Since the advertising field is still relatively young in Haiti, there are no written documents describing the field in Haiti. As a consequence, unless otherwise noted, the description of the advertising industry is based on my direct experience as an advertising professional working in the advertising field in Haiti for three years.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Haiti has a population of 9,801,664 habitants (World Fact Book, 2011). The vast majority, 60 percent, is between 15 and 64 years old, and the remaining 40 percent is split between children ages 14 and under who represent about 35.9% of the population and adults older than 64 who represent the remaining 3.9%. Port-au-Prince, the capital city and the main area where advertising offices are located, has a population of 2.143 million, which is about 46 percent of the country's population. Access to education is

restricted to a limited number of citizens. As a consequence, nearly 47.1% of the population over the age of 15 cannot read or write ("Central Intelligence Agency," 2012). The fact that 60% of the population is 15 or older implies that a substantial portion of the Haitian population falls in the category of illiterate people. For the purpose of clarification, it is important to remember that adult literacy rate is defined as “the percentage of people ages 15 and above who can, with understanding, read and write a short, simple statement on their everyday life” ("Literacy rate; adult").

The country has two official languages, French and Creole. The exact number of speakers for each respective language is not confirmed, but many say French speakers comprise between 10 and 20 percent of the total population. We can affirm with confidence, however, that Creole is the language spoken by the majority, including those who master the French language, as the ability to speak French is directly linked to one’s educational level.

THE ADVERTISING MARKET

Haiti has not escaped the pervasiveness of advertising, which has been booming since the mid 2000s. Billboards and street banners are plastered everywhere and anywhere an open space is available. Advertising has even taken over much of radio broadcast time, radio being the most popular advertising medium available in the country ("Doing business in," 2012). The field still relies heavily on traditional advertising methods, as these methods are the most effective way to reach the majority. Digital

advertising is still in its early stages and is being mostly used to communicate with Haitians living abroad.

Ads are created by locally-owned and operated agencies. The first and oldest agency, *PubliGestion*, was established in 1977 (Publigestion, 2012), and the other agencies that are currently leading the market, including *Scream*, founded in 2004, *Blue Mango* ("Blue mango studios," 2011), and *Dagmar* ("Dagmar", 2008), founded in 2008, have been established within the last ten years. A new trend is emerging as younger practitioners entering the market choose to go freelance. As a result, many companies are now seeking out independent creatives to take on parts of their accounts so as to avoid the high costs associated with hiring an agency. This creates an increasingly competitive agency market, making it more difficult for practitioners to come together to discuss possibilities within the field.

For over 25 years, industry professionals have vaguely mentioned the possibility of overcoming their differences and coming together to create an organization that would include all advertising agencies. Such an organization would allow open communication between agencies so as to improve the field. However, the increasingly fierce environment makes it more difficult for practitioners to come together as they are unable to picture the benefits of such an organization in such a small market.

These agencies are free to use whatever ploys they choose as there are no governing bodies regulating advertising in Haiti. The *Le Nouvelliste* article published in 2005 in which the author raised concerns about responsibility within the advertising field calls for an intervention from the public to take a stand in the absence of legislation regulating advertising ("Une nouvelle affiche", 2005). A search through Haiti's *Le*

Moniteur, which publishes the country's legislation and decrees, further confirms this absence of regulations. Indeed, the only legislation related to creative and artistic work in the country is related to intellectual property (Le Moniteur, 1968). The government is working towards enforcing copyright regulations, which are protected by the country's Constitution ("Doing business in," 2012), through the *Bureau Haïtien du Droit d'Auteur (BHDA)*, Haitian Bureau of Copyright, created in 2006 (Dorélien, 2011). However, no guidelines or legislation are in place to protect consumers from advertising's potential harms, which is critical when dealing with vulnerable audiences.

Concerns about the Advertising Field in Haiti

The following section examines the implications of Haiti's low literacy rate for advertisers and the problematic tactics used by advertisers in that country through various examples. The examples provided in the different sections are a combination of articles from Haiti's written press, notably the country's leading newspaper *Le Nouvelliste*, and personal experiences working in advertising in Haiti that have led me to question our duties as advertising professionals. Previous work by non-Haitian scholars is referenced where applicable as well.

THE LOW LITERACY RATE AND ADVERTISING

Put in the advertising context, Haiti's low literacy rate should be alarming to practitioners especially given the fact that Haitian advertisers target this fraction of the population with their messages on a regular basis. Indeed, in general, advertising messages are tailored to the mass, except in the case of high-end products such as luxury cars and jewelry. For clarification purposes, it must be noted that, in Haiti, the target audience is easily identified through the language chosen for a given message. The use of Creole typically means that the average population is being targeted, whereas the use of a mix of the two languages or of French only indicates a narrower more elite target.

When it comes to general understanding of various forms of messages, advertising can potentially have a negative impact on populations with a low literacy level. While this does not necessarily mean that illiterate people do not have the ability to pick up on inaccuracies or negative persuasion attempts over time, the inability to read

can affect one's ability to remain well informed or think critically, a skill that is necessary to discern the many persuasion attempts advertisers rely on. Responses to persuasion are part of an intricate process that relies on "abstract reasoning capabilities developed by learning to extract meaning from printed text" (Wallendorf, 2001, p. 508). It is based on a series of interrelated steps that people with limited reading capacities are not always able to follow. Based on the above information and demographic statistics, it is, therefore, possible to infer that, because of the low literacy level, a vast majority of the Haitian population may also lack the ability to interpret certain advertising statements correctly.

This inability to interpret statements may also be due to the fact that the advertising field is still young in Haiti. The average member of the population may lack familiarity with the field's techniques. An important part of the population may not have sufficient knowledge of the methods practitioners use to sell products to them. This means that advertising messages could not only be potentially more powerful than anticipated, but also and most importantly, that Haitians experience disadvantages that make them more likely to fall into the category of a vulnerable target, which should be a concern for advertisers.

As mentioned before, the word "vulnerable" in this particular context has been defined as any group of people who have "diminished capacities to understand the role of advertising, product effects, or both" (Baker, Gentry & Rittenburg, 2005, p.129), and as such, are more susceptible to deception or harm by reckless advertisers. Those who fall in the vulnerable category are those who experience disadvantages and as such are more exposed to the negative impact of external factors beyond their control. For the purpose

of studying Haiti's market, demographic factors and educational limitations make it clear that the word "vulnerable" is most appropriately used to refer to a broad market segment; that of the substantial portion of the population facing setbacks. Their vulnerability does not mean that they are passive recipients, however. The word is used to imply that, if no one looks out for them, they will be more susceptible to the influence of advertising, an influence which is not always positive as will be demonstrated below.

DECEPTION AND EXAGGERATIONS

The following example drawn from my experience as an advertising professional working in Haiti helps to both illustrate the vulnerabilities the Haitian population faces, and stress the importance of a more responsible advertising industry in the country. There are two aspects to this story; it further illustrates the market's vulnerabilities while touching on the topic of advertisers' ethics.

While doing field research about a product category, I interviewed someone, whom we will call Jean for the purpose of this paper in order to maintain anonymity. Jean, who is also a victim of the educational limitations faced by the population, strongly believed that the amount of money spent on advertising was a sign of a high quality product. The more a product was advertised, the better it had to be; there was no doubt about it in his mind. The reality, however, is that Jean was referring to a brand whose products' quality was actually questioned on the market. Many, including Jean, had stopped buying from that particular brand the previous year because of its poor quality. That brand had, however, increased its advertising spending and given away hundreds of promotional items, a strategy that had helped it regain the trust of many who, like Jean,

had switched to a different brand. Even though the quality had not improved, Jean was confident that the product was once again the best on the market, and therefore planned to start buying it again. Perhaps it is important to note that it was also the cheapest brand on the market, as that may have played a role in convincing Jean as well.

The preceding example reveals that, undoubtedly, the commonly accepted controversial premise that the “consumer is smart” cannot be applied to Haiti’s demographic context without some reservation. This “consumer is smart” assumption is most widely used in developed countries to explain why regulatory bodies accept the use of certain advertising tactics that would otherwise be considered unacceptable and potentially threatening to a population’s well-being. The average consumer is thought to have sufficient knowledge to be able to identify the various strategies used by advertisers to sell products, therefore mitigating any harm that could potentially result from exposure to certain well-crafted messages.

An evaluation of some of the problematic tactics is important to illustrate the potential risks to Haiti’s vulnerable population. In light of the preceding story, the often disputed exaggerations and deception tactics used by advertisers are worth mentioning. While certain forms of exaggerations may commonly be accepted throughout the world, there are certain circumstances under which they can be harmful. Even though Jean’s story is that of one person, his comments about the link between advertising and product quality are a sign that his circle, and possibly other members of the population, may have the same thinking process.

Preston raised this same issue in his work on puffery when he said that “puffery’s vulnerable point is precisely this: Maybe people *do* believe it and may be

deceived by it” (Preston, 1972). Preston’s work brings us to the other issue related to the questionable product. The exaggerated campaign relied heavily on the use of puffery to convince the population that the product was worth buying. The main message featured on all the ads was that the product was the best on the market. As Preston anticipated, Jean did believe in the messages, which shows that puffery can in fact be deceptive. Though, Preston’s work is specifically related to puffery, it touches on the potential dangers associated with the use of exaggerations by advertisers targeting groups that may actually believe wholeheartedly in the messages they are exposed to.

The most important lesson to take from Jean’s interpretation of advertising is that, as Preston expressed, it is important to take such possibilities into account when evaluating advertising messages and methods, an evaluation that should occur prior to the launch of a campaign. Agencies should make it a habit to pretest their campaigns on the most vulnerable consumers as often as possible given the project constraints. This commitment to pretesting will ensure that the message in question is not only getting across but that it is not potentially harmful to the target audience. If certain groups are interpreting the amount of advertising as a sign of a product’s quality when such is not always the case, an exaggerated campaign and the use of puffery can definitely be a problem, and one that advertisers must address. The particular example illustrated through Jean’s story reveals the dangers associated with exaggerated campaigns. This danger is even more important considering that such exaggerations can be misleading as is the case with the product featured in Jean’s story.

This exaggerated campaign brings us to the topic of deception in advertising, a topic, which brings up an even bigger debate about ethics in advertising. Industry

professionals who were working on that particular account were aware of the product's questionable quality. They spoke about it behind closed doors and chose not to make it public because of the financial risks associated with losing that client. This tendency to put financials first is not new in the industry. Practitioners tend to weigh the financial risks associated with certain decisions, even if an ethical issue may be at stake, before making a decision (Drumwright, 2003). In Haiti's case, as in most places, such a practice can be damaging to the target population.

Given the demographic context, the risk for potential harm to society is heightened, making it a problem, and a moral and ethical one to say the least. While shedding a false light on a given product is typically condemned everywhere, because of Haiti's peculiar situation, and given the product's questionable quality, we cannot help but mention it again. That is the only way to stress the importance of truthfulness in advertising. When advertisers choose to close their eyes and act like they are unaware of the fact that a given product is questionable, their attitude raises both moral and ethical concerns. When advertising is used without a concern for consumer welfare, it puts an entire population at risk. Such attitudes speak of an incautious advertising field focused on financial gain only.

Exaggerations and false pretenses are not the only questionable advertising tactics when it comes to vulnerable populations, however. The concerns about the Haitian population's vulnerabilities should go beyond the use of tactics that consumers may not always discern to encompass what is obvious to the public and what leads them to qualify ads as unethical or indecent exposure, as is illustrated in the newspaper articles mentioned in the next section.

ADVERTISING CONTROVERSIES IN THE HAITIAN PRESS

The controversial debate about advertising and its tactics is not new in Haiti where advertisements are a common conversation topic. Whether it is the chosen celebrity spokesperson, a well executed ad, or one that has shocking value, ads are not only a part of everyday conversations, but of the news as well. Many ads considered ethically controversial have made the headlines via intellectual groups who do not hesitate to voice their opinion when they consider a given ad to be unethical. A search for the French equivalent of the word *advertising* in Haiti's leading newspaper, *Le Nouvelliste*, brings up articles written in reaction to controversial advertisements.

STEREOTYPING AND NORM-SETTING

In 2005, two articles were published in that paper in reaction to a billboard that had been placed in a high traffic area. Both articles featured demands coming from feminist groups taking a stand against the billboard, which featured what that group considered an indecent and inappropriate portrayal of women. The billboard in question featured a woman from behind wearing a bikini while holding the product. The debate about advertising's portrayal of women brought up by these groups of feminists is not new. It speaks to the problematic issue of the reinforcement of stereotypes that is often discussed among those who are concerned about the impact the advertising field has on society (Bouch, Friestad & Wright, 2009; Pollay, 1986; Preston, 1998). Now more than ever Haitian women are fighting against the common practice of portraying them as sex objects, thus as inferior to men in a "masochic" society where women, particularly lower class women, are struggling to get their voice heard ("Les féministes haïtiennes," 2005;

Paul-Austin, 2005). Such a picture may encourage physical and verbal abuse of helpless women who have no one to turn to for help. Beyond this image painted regularly by society, however, is also the issue of bad taste and indecent exposure. In addition, this billboard was placed in a high traffic area frequented by many school children who are vulnerable to advertising as well.

During that same time period, another group was protesting against the use of violent imagery in an already violent political setting ("Une nouvelle affiche," 2005). The contested billboard featured guns that were meant to showcase bullet proof windows, which were being introduced to the market. While the gun and gunshot visuals may not necessarily induce negative behavior, their use in advertising might send a message that the use of guns is accepted. Also, the billboard is failing to condemn this type of behavior, which is an issue in a context of political unrest linked to extreme violence. It is portraying what is, and should be, a societal concern as a norm, a practice that has received a lot of criticism. Advertisers should be careful not to create ads that could potentially "induce harmful behaviors within vulnerable populations" (Hyman, 2009, p. 202).

These articles raise legitimate concerns about the use of visuals in advertising. In such a context, given the low literacy rate, visuals may be more powerful than anticipated. The controversies sparked by the images used in the criticized billboards are important issues advertisers should take into account. It is important that advertisers take into account the message a given visual can send as images do infer a meaning. The possibility that a visual can have a negative impact can usually be anticipated based on

the societal context of the time. Advertisers should avoid “modeling hazardous behavior[s]” as such a practice can reinforce them (Pollay, 1986, p.21).

IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE TO CLEAR, TRUTHFUL MESSAGES

There are other tactics that may easily be overlooked but that can also be linked to the topic. Another method worth mentioning, though it does not necessarily make the news headlines as often as the previously mentioned controversies, is the use of clear and concise messages, a practice that is needed to facilitate understanding. This idea of clear messaging is directly related to the appropriate use of language, an idea which the Autocontrol Code of Advertising Practice, established in Spain as the country’s advertising self-regulation organization, highlights in its guide. The code states that advertisers “should take any appropriate measure to ensure that the [...] advertisement is clearly understood by consumers” (Autocontrol, 2002).

While in Haiti language is used as a targeting method, certain language distortions can lead to confusion, and therefore impair understanding. Language can become a barrier leading to difficulties in message interpretations, therefore creating misinformation which, in Haiti’s case, can be critical given the population. It is important for practitioners to be aware of the fact that the Creole language is a language with limitations. This is mainly due to the fact that certain words simply do not exist in that language. These limitations could potentially constitute an obstacle for those seeking to translate campaigns that were previously implemented in a foreign language elsewhere. While the easy or creative solution could be to just create or borrow a new word, such a practice can lead to confusion as was the case with the recent launch, by Haiti’s main

cellphone carrier, Digicel, of the *Be Extraordinary* campaign (www.digicelhaiti.com).

This campaign was first created in Jamaica and then translated into Creole and French for Haiti. The term *extraordinary* was literally translated into Creole as *ekstraòdinè*, a word which does not exist in that language, and led to confusion over its actual meaning among the entire population, including the educated, when it was launched on the market in May, 2012. Advertisers should not seek to confuse the consumer, especially in light of the educational barriers the population faces. They should be careful in their creative use of language. Consistent use of everyday language can be helpful to reach that goal of maintaining clear messages that speak to everyone.

Language distortions do not only lead to inaccuracies in message interpretations; they can also impact everyday language. Such an impact is not always positive in a country like Haiti as Gary Victor points out in the *Le Nouvelliste* article, “Les travers” (Victor, 2012). The author reacts against the emerging trend in the local advertising industry to introduce invented terms that quickly permeate popular language, leading to negative distortions of the spoken language. To him, these invented words contribute to the degradation of everyday language, and preventive measures must be taken against such practices so as to avoid what he calls a sign of the society’s descent toward mediocrity.

The advertising field has been criticized before for its increasing influence on language, and proof of said influence can be found in the introduction of brand names in everyday vocabulary (e.g. *Kleenex* for tissue, *Chapstick* for lip balm, etc...) (Friedman, 1985, pp. 927-938; Tankard, 1975). While these terms do not necessarily constitute

examples of distorted languages, they do prove how advertising can impact the spoken language.

Given Haiti's context, advertising professionals have to be very mindful of the language they use because their work has the potential to play an educational role, even if that is not the advertiser's intent. Because of the lack of literacy, a portion of the population could be acquiring language skills through advertising. Many of the humorous distortions Haitian advertisers use rely on a combination of word play between the French and Creole languages. These combinations can seem accurate to those who have just a limited knowledge of the subtleties that separate the two languages, as is the case with the majority of the Haitian population who speaks Creole only. When those who mostly speak Creole attempt to speak in French, the language placed in the advertisements may have a negative impact on their vocabulary.

An example can be drawn from an ad for a milk product that was successful because of its humorous tone. In the commercial, an old man is telling a child to drink his milk and says "Brè le lèt." As the child refuses to drink the milk, the old man switches to speaking in Creole and says "Bwè lèt la." The problem is that the French term for "drink the milk" is actually "bois le lait." In Haiti, it became a somewhat common phrase for people to say "brè le lèt" instead of "bois le lait," especially among those Creole speakers who might think they are speaking proper French when saying the former. The Haitian population faces many educational limitations as indicated by the low literacy rate. In more developed and more literate countries, advertisers may be able to get away with such language distortions, but such should not be the case in Haiti. Advertising messages should never contribute to the further degradation of the education of their audience.

MISLEADING MESSAGES

Another criticism of the language used by Haitian advertisers can be found in *Le Nouvelliste*. Though not related to misuses of a given language, “Un peu de retenue, messieurs les chroniqueurs!” by guest writer Lyonel Trouillot raises ethical concerns about the inappropriate messages often used by commentators of live sports events. The author reacts against certain statements made about sponsors’ products during soccer games, statements which are not always in line with ethics. To illustrate this point, Trouillot provides an alcohol related example in which the commentator affirms that a player is drinking rum to warm up before entering the field, or that another is not performing well because he did not drink that rum (Trouillot, 2012). These claims may have a humorous tone; however, given the product in question, they do bring legitimate ethical concerns to the table. These commentators are promoting alcohol as an appropriate energy drink to the millions of listeners or viewers of all ages that are glued to their radios or TV screens.

Commentators are often assigned the task of advertising their sponsors during the games, and as Trouillot’s example shows, they do not always do so in an appropriate manner. While these commentators are not advertising professionals, because they are assigned the role of presenting their sponsors, they do play the role of a brand spokesperson during those games. They provide “consumers with information about [the sponsor’s] products and services” (IAE). Trouillot’s example touches on the idea that, just like advertising, editorial content should always “serve the best interest” of their audience, and that “a single standard of helpful truth and cleanness should prevail” as enunciated in *The Journalist’s Creed* written by Walter Williams (“The journalist’s

creed,"). Commentators should therefore be provided with appropriate scripts or guidelines that will highlight what should or should not be said over the air. There should be industry standards on how to proceed or present sponsors in editorial content. Such standards would help avoid violations of ethics similar to the provided example, as these violations can both induce negative behavior and reflect negatively on the field.

Overall, the examples provided indicate that Haitian practitioners should take the populations' vulnerabilities seriously. As locals, they are aware, or at least should be aware, of the limitations their audience faces. They should therefore be more careful and show a greater degree of responsibility in performing their craft. There are certain steps they can take to protect the welfare of their target audiences, as will be highlighted in the discussion that follows.

Discussion

In the book *Deception in the Market Place*, the authors express how important it is that consumers learn to protect themselves from deceptive communications “beyond reliance on legal protection” (Boush, Friestad & Wright, 2009, p.17). However, as noted before, this skill is usually acquired through education as it requires a thorough, critical process. Due to the low literacy level, the average Haitian consumer cannot always rely on such self protective behavior, as Jean’s story illustrates.

While in developed countries regulatory institutions place constraints on advertisers so as to ensure that the convincing tactics used are not misleading, Haitian advertisers have the freedom to deploy whatever convincing tactics they choose due the absence of legislation of the field in the country. This lack of regulation is problematic, especially given the fact that Haitian practitioners do not have the luxury of working with an average population that always possesses the ability to critically process advertisements. Concerns about the potential impact of advertising on vulnerable populations should be of the utmost importance to Haitian practitioners given that the population faces the many limitations mentioned above.

Haitian advertisers should seek to carry out their duty in a responsible and ethical manner. As professionals, they cannot afford to ignore the characteristics of the population their messages target. Practitioners must work together towards elaborating industry guidelines, for they do have a responsibility to society. It is their civic and professional duty to ensure that consumers are not harmed in any way. In a society where there are no regulatory institutions for the advertising field and therefore little to no risk

of legal repercussions for advertisers, the context in which they perform their craft should be an incentive to take responsibility for their work. It is simply the right thing to do.

To become more responsible, advertisers should evaluate appropriate, ethical, and just responses to consumer vulnerability so as to always incorporate them into their communication efforts without exception. In doing so, they should evaluate what has occurred in the past and create written industry standards and guidelines. These guidelines should address topics related to both societal and ethical concerns such as language usage and practices or methods that could potentially have a negative impact on the interpretation of advertising messages by the most vulnerable segments of the population. In devising those guidelines, practitioners should seek inspiration in codes of ethics and regulations as they are implemented elsewhere. Such an analysis will help them identify the types of codes or guidelines they should seek to adhere to so as to produce more responsible messaging.

These codes and regulations include, but are not limited to, those elaborated by the Institute for Advertising Ethics (IAE) which promotes constant transparency, and the need for advertisers to always conduct themselves, their business, and relationship to consumers in a “*fair, honest, and forthright manner.*” This document includes eight principles, including two that are closely tied to the topic of this paper. Principle one stipulates that “advertising, public relations, marketing communications, news, and editorial all share a common objective of truth and high ethical standards in serving the public,” touching on the concerns raised about editorial content as they relate to sports commentators. The second relevant principle is principle five that states that “advertisers should treat consumers fairly based on the nature of the audience to whom the ads are

directed and the nature of the product or service advertised” (IAE). It cannot be stressed enough how crucial it is for advertisers to be aware of their audience and, in Haiti’s case, its vulnerabilities so that they can craft their message accordingly in a responsible manner.

Another code worth looking at, though it was created specifically for the Public Relations field, is the one enacted by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). This society’s Member Code of Ethics is “designed to be a useful guide for PRSA members as they carry out their ethical responsibilities” (2000). Indeed, given that the line between advertising and public relations is often blurred, the codes enacted for public relations professionals can also be a starting point for practitioners seeking to implement their own code. This particular code can also serve to highlight the need for practitioners to overcome their differences and get together to enact industry guidelines and standards. Each and every PRSA member must sign this code and pledge to adhere to its principles. Without a commitment at the organizational level, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for the advertising field to become more responsible. Indeed, “solutions to some macro ethical problems to which advertising contributes require the collaborative efforts of organizations or groups of organizations” (Drumwright, 2003, p.401). There is no doubt then that Haitian practitioners should seek inspiration in existing codes and guidelines implemented elsewhere in an effort to “anticipate and accommodate, by precedent, ethical challenges that may arise,” just like PRSA’s code seeks to accomplish (PRSA).

Finally, Haitian practitioners should consider adhering to the principle of self-regulation, which for the industry “is a system by which the advertising, marketing, agency and media industry set voluntary rules and standards of practice that go beyond

their legal obligations” (“Self-regulation”). This idea comes from the existing International Code of Advertising Practices elaborated by the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), and is popular in many countries. Self-regulation supposes a voluntary adherence to regulations of advertising activity. The role of self-regulatory bodies is to monitor advertising activities so as to ensure that the implemented messages are acceptable for the audience they target. The ultimate goal is to “help sustain high standards of truth and accuracy in national consumer advertising for the benefit of consumers and thereby to enhance the reputation of the industry as a whole” (Xuemei, Kitchen & Cuomo, 2011, pp. 393- 396). Self-regulation should help provide the structure needed in Haiti to protect the different parties involved in the advertising process, including agencies and the public. Haitian practitioners should consult self-regulatory organizations such as the Better Business Bureau (BBB), which “promote[s] and foster[s] the highest ethical relationship between businesses and the public through voluntary self-regulation, consumer and business education, and service excellence” (“What is the,” 2012). The International Advertising Association which includes 76 countries and whose mission includes “encouraging greater practice and acceptance of advertising self-regulation” should be consulted as well (IAA, 2012). These entities can be a great starting point in coming up with self-regulations as they provide useful insights into topics legislation address elsewhere.

It should, however, be noted that the concept of self-regulation is adopted in most countries due to the threat of actual regulations set by governing bodies representing the legal system. Careful attention should therefore be given to measures developed countries take to protect their vulnerable populations as well. Indeed, advertisers should look into

external bodies regulating advertising such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which was established in the United States with the goal to work “for the consumer to prevent fraud, deception, and unfair business practices in the marketplace” (Vladeck, 2012), have set rules that are meant to protect those whom they consider as being part of a vulnerable population group. Finally, it is important to also point out that, while self-regulation helps the industry reduce the involvement of governmental bodies in the advertising process, a well-known criticism of this practice is the lack of enforcement from the self-regulation agencies.

While seeking inspiration from the mentioned guidelines and regulations can point advertisers in the right direction, industry professionals should be aware of the fact that the criteria used to define vulnerable populations are not the same everywhere around the globe. Developed countries typically use that term to designate specific population segments, and therefore, their definitions do not necessarily encompass such a large population or even a population which characteristics are similar to that of Haiti. In fact, both the IAE and ICC codes mentioned above include guidelines related to children advertising only. Children are “considered a special group requiring special care and diligence by marketers to avoid harm and exploiting their lack of experience” (“Codes Center for advertising,”). However, such guidelines are useful as they touch on the topic of lack of “cognitive skills to evaluate the credibility of advertising” (*Principles and practices*, 2011).

Overall, practitioners should keep in mind that regulatory concerns are specific to individual markets and that as a consequence preventive measures will vary accordingly.

Future Research

This section provides suggestions for potential topics Haitian practitioners should consider exploring in order to better establish the advertising industry as a responsible field concerned with the welfare of its audiences. Suggested topics include a closer look at the segmentation process and the possible threats to the Haiti's younger demographic.

SEGMENTATION

Besides the establishment of industry standards and guidelines, Haitian practitioners should also consider improving their segmenting methods. Segmentation is intended to identify appropriate groups of people that a specific message should target. It typically goes beyond simply differentiating between Creole and French speakers or luxury and non-luxury brands, as is currently being practiced in Haiti. Individual differences do exist and, for advertisers, these differences imply that different groups will respond differently to a given message. Consequently, messages must be adapted to fit the needs of different market segments. While the same product can be sold to different groups, it is often necessary and recommended to use different tactics adapted to each of the identified target population groups.

Better segmenting will not only lead to more effective targeting, thus increasing advertising's effectiveness, but will help advertisers in their efforts to become more responsible as well. Indeed, through segmentation, they will be able to identify each group and their potential vulnerabilities so as to avoid practices that could potentially

have a negative impact. Further research on the segmentation process should be conducted in order to evaluate the best segmenting methods that fit the needs of the Haitian market.

It should be noted that the targeting practice is often under attack, especially when it relates to potential consumer vulnerabilities (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997; Schlossberg, 1990). Criticism of the segmentation process as it relates to vulnerable populations should therefore be taken into account as well so as to avoid tactics that are considered harmful to these groups.

ADVERTISING AND CHILDREN

Another topic left untouched in this paper which may be worth exploring relates to the potential threats of advertising when it comes to Haitian children. This younger demographic was excluded from this paper both due to the legal definition of the term *literacy rate*, which focuses on populations ages 15 and above, and to the fact that, at this time, there are no Haitian ads specifically directed to children in the country.

Children do, however, represent a significant portion within the Haitian population since approximately 35.9 percent of the population is under the age of 15 (World Fact Book, 2011). As mentioned throughout the paper, other countries pay careful attention to this particular group because kids can be very susceptible when it comes to advertising. Though currently local practitioners may not be targeting children, with the booming of the country's advertising industry, this possibility should be explored. For example, should the field shift towards a narrower targeting method based

on age groups, such a research would come in handy as it would have already anticipated the potential issues related to this particular age group.

Conclusion

To repeat the words of Hyman, it is time that Haitian practitioners make responsible ads their ideal. As that author puts it, “without an ideal for responsible ads, organizations are less likely to avoid irresponsible ads.” The need for standards within the Haitian advertising field is a pressing issue that is needed to “mitigate societal concerns about possible negative effects of advertising” (Hyman, 2009, p. 199).

Haitian practitioners should realize and recognize that, in the absence of public policies meant to protect consumers from exposure to misleading or deceptive advertising, it is their civic duty to overcome their differences and come together to elaborate not just codes of ethics but guidelines that practitioners should adhere to. Advertisers should always be held to high standards of ethics in the practice of their craft without the need for any legal intervention from the authorities. In doing so, Haitian advertisers should all pledge to refrain from any practice that may potentially be damaging to the population. Such practices include but are not limited to avoiding practices that may cause misinformation, miseducation or misinterpretation due to the disadvantaged situation of the majority of the population. Sometimes this will even include challenging a client or refusing the account.

A starting point for these guidelines can be any of the guidelines adopted in developed countries. The examples used here should neither be taken as implying that all these bodies should be established in Haiti nor that all their guidelines are applicable to that market. They are simply mentioned to illustrate the topics advertisers could address.

Haitian practitioners should make sure to adapt these guidelines to fit the needs of the Haitian market and to update them continuously on a regular basis.

It is a known fact that the Haitian market is small and struggles economically. While agencies' financial stability is dependent on a limited number of large companies with enough revenue to invest in advertising, this financial dependence should not deter determination to adhere to more responsible and ethical advertising. Pledging to adopt industry guidelines and follow codes of ethics implies that there will be times when agencies will have to make decisions that can impact their financial stability. Such times will most often include circumstances where society's well-being is at stake. Responsible advertisers should, therefore, always do what is right by society.

The road towards more responsible advertising might be difficult, but ethics and the welfare of society should always prevail.

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