1.1 Advertising Critique: Themes, Actors and Challenges in a Digital Age

Abstract: Ever since advertising emerged, both its functions and threats have been debated. The themes of advertising ethics and critique are multifaceted; the majority relate to the depiction of violence, hypersexualization and various “-isms” (e.g. ageism). The digital environment has added new aspects to the topic; respondents primarily worry about their loss of control, transparency and privacy. At the same time, the Internet provides a platform for critical voices – from keeping informed via the signing of petitions against certain advertising practices, to becoming an advertising activist her- or himself. This chapter addresses the current state of advertising critique in this digital environment. It will give an overview of the dominant themes and important actors and drivers of advertising critique. Furthermore, obstacles and stumbling stones for both research and practice are discussed and challenges identified.

The critique of advertising is as old as advertising itself; its pros and cons have been debated ever since advertising emerged. From its economic impact (e.g. Albion, Farris 1981 via the controversy about its effects on excessive materialism (e.g. Drumwright 2007), to its role in protecting the existing social order by promoting inequality, particularly in terms of race and gender (O’Guinn 2007) – the themes are multifaceted and driven by different actors with specific, often opposing interests. Without doubt, we are surrounded by advertising in its different forms, and sometimes advertising placements take grotesque shapes which affect and change our familiar patterns of reception in formerly advertising free areas, such as sports (everyone is used to it nowadays) and even religion, as the photograph in Figure 1 shows.

Thereby, the importance of advertising for individuals and the society is undoubted. Potter even ascribed to advertising the role of an “instrument of social control” (2009, p. 175) and suggested that “advertising now compares with such long-standing institutions as the school and the church in the magnitude of its social influence” (2009, p. 167). In fact, scholars and professionals alike have highlighted advertisers’ responsibility in promoting societal wellbeing (e.g. Baker, Martinson 2001; Cunningham, P. 1999; Waller 2012). However, since the beginning of advertising, the debates surrounding ethical standards for advertising revolve around the same, enduring themes and thus seem to be at a “dead end”.

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As an example, in his seminal work on the role of advertising Pollay (1986) sets out the question as to whether advertising is a mirror of society, or whether it acts as an agent of change. Since then, this question has been asked repeatedly. Nevertheless the basic premise behind this question is: who is to blame for the harm advertising can cause? In other words, if advertising is a mirror of society,
then the industry is not to blame, but we all are. If we do not like the ads, we should stop watching the program they are in and we should certainly stop buying the products. But if we respond (as the advertisers intend), then we have no one to blame but ourselves. On the other hand, if advertising is the agent of change, then – according to Pardun – “It’s advertising’s fault we’re the way we are.” (2014, p. 3). Of course, it is not that simple and in many cases both situations apply.

Staying within this duty-based\(^1\) perspective on advertising critique, one has to ask: who sets the moral and ethical principles advertising should be based on? To lay this duty on the advertising industry alone is questionable. Murphy (1998) argues with the “unholy trinity”. He states: “[a]dvertisers, agencies, and the media represent the three main parties in any advertising campaign. Among these three parties, it appears no one is willing to accept primary responsibility for raising ethical standards. Consequently, ethics in advertising is perceived to be rather low.” (1998, p. 318). On top of that, the digital environment nowadays adds a new aspect and complexity to the topic.

Based on interviews with industry leaders, Drumwright and Murphy (2009) found that the ethical issues presented by new digital media are different. To put it simply, the respondents are largely concerned with the advertiser’s loss of control, and issues of transparency and privacy. The ethical arena arising in the Internet and blogosphere was characterized as the “Wild West” – “a rough and tough, no-holds-barred context in which the regulations, guidelines and controls of traditional media are absent.” (2009, p. 87). In response, a number of different groups who question advertising practices in general and who debate their individual and social consequences have been formed. Ranging from individual net activists who denounce sexisms by mocking advertisements to NGOs engaging in a critique of general consumerism, to the self-regulatory institutions of the advertising industry itself – the list of the various agents in advertising critique is long and diverse.

In this chapter we will discuss the current state of advertising critique in the digital environment, both from a research and a practical perspective. We will sketch its historical roots and the consequent dominant themes within this interdisciplinary field of interest. In doing so we will (1) identify important actors and

\(^1\) Duty-based ethics, also referred to as deontological ethics, is based on the assumption that some acts are right or wrong in themselves, regardless of the good or bad consequences that may be produced. Under this form of ethics and ethical questioning one cannot justify an action by showing that it produced good consequences. Accordingly, the theory of deontology would state that advertisers and individuals are morally obligated to act in accordance with a certain set of principles and rules regardless of the outcome.
drivers of advertising critique, (2) discuss extant barriers and incompatibilities within the discipline, and (3) propose future directions, especially with regard to the digital and mobile environment of which advertising is a part.

1 The Roots of Research on Advertising Critique

Advertising critique and advertising ethics is an area of research that is driven by manifold interests and disciplines – rooted in philosophy, advertising ethics has branched into many fields. This is also due to the fact that advertising has various shapes depending on the point of view. First, advertising can be viewed as part of product promotion and thus as a vital ingredient of a marketing and branding strategy. According to Bohrmann (1997) advertising is primarily a planned attempt to influence individuals’ opinions, attitudes and behavior about products, services, brands and companies with communication activities in order to reach economic goals. In this marketing context advertising ethics is therefore only a single aspect of a (much wider) research area investigating advertising’s effects on aspects of image, brand attitudes or buying intentions. Second, and closely related to this, advertising is viewed as a form of persuasive communication and as such is a subject of communication research. Here advertising research does not only focus on economic advertising, but also includes social and political advertising. Willems (1999) referred here to a strategic rationality that is implied by advertising. However, Bohrmann (2010) highlights that the attempt to influence, to persuade, to sway may not be bad or ethically illegitimate per se. Both the economic and the communication science perspective on advertising are primarily settled in the micro perspective and focus chiefly on the short-term effects of specific stimuli by drawing on psychology and experimental paradigms (Drumwright 2007). In contrast, the third view understands advertising as public communication. This macro perspective concentrates on the aggregate effects of advertising, including advertising to vulnerable segments (Bonifield, Cole 2007) and advertising’s role in consumption and collective welfare (O’Guinn 2007). A common criticism of advertising from the macro level is that it protects the existing social order and promotes inequality, particularly in terms of race, class and gender (O’Guinn 2007).

Drumwright (2007) has categorized social criticism of advertising on the macro level according to its three primary critiques: advertising encourages excessive materialism, advertising engenders and/or reinforces problematic stereotypes, and advertising cultivates false values and thus problematic behavior. In this context philosophy with its question of individual and collective ethical
guidelines plays a vital role. Advertising ethics can thereby be discussed within different philosophical perspectives (Förster, Brantner 2016). As an example, the utilitarian perspective builds on principles by asking what is best for all, or the greatest number of people possible (Mill 2003). For Mill moral reasoning “was equivalent to calculating consequences for human happiness” (Christians 2007, p. 118), that is, utilitarianism requires advertisers to maximize happiness for all (Cunningham, A. 1999). Another position is social contract theory, which highlights that a person’s moral obligations depend on a contract among them to form the society in which they live (Friend 2004). Rawls (1971) here argues that the best society would be formed by principles of justice chosen by rational citizens behind a veil of ignorance, in which their own social status and goals would not affect their decisions. Hence, practitioners need orientation and useful criteria “to step conceptually out of their roles as powerful disseminators of persuasive promotional messages and to evaluate the equity of the appeal from the perspective of the weaker parties” (Baker, Martinson 2001, p. 166).

2 Challenges for Advertising Critique in the Digital Age

With digitalization the scope and scale of ethical questions have increased. Tanyel, Stuart and Griffin (2013) date the beginning of Internet advertising back to 1994. During these last two decades it has evolved from placing banners to a wide variety of Internet techniques including video banners, viral marketing, rich media, social networking, search engine marketing, blogs, in-game advertising, emails, micro sites, user-generated content, mobile marketing and so forth (see the chapter on programmatic ad-tech in this volume).

One of the main issues in the digital advertising age refers to privacy and behavioral targeting. It is, without question, at the same time the biggest opportunity for advertisers as the collecting of data allows for the identification of consumers via cookies placed on their devices tracking all their online activities (Snyder 2011). Advertisers use these data to better target audiences in order to direct more specific ads to them. These data are also used to predict future behavior via the search for “statistical twins”. The availability of these (big) data bringing light into every single characteristic of our online behavior – from shopping via searching to media use – is probably the biggest threat from an ethical standpoint, because it raises questions of privacy. Privacy is concerned with the right of persons to determine what, to whom and to what extent
they want to disclose information about themselves. The right of privacy, also widely regarded with the “general right of an individual to be let alone“, was formulated and published by Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis in the Harvard Law Review in 1890 for the first time, a long time before the Internet was invented. In their seminal article the authors claimed:

“Recent inventions and business methods call attention to the next step which must be taken for the protection of the person, and for securing to the individual what Judge Cooley calls the right “to be let alone”. Instantaneous photographs and newspaper enterprise have invaded the sacred precincts of private and domestic life; and numerous mechanical devices threaten to make good the prediction that “what is whispered in the closet shall be proclaimed from the house-tops.” (Warren, Brandeis 1890, § 4).

Although the amount and type of data collected about users have changed, privacy issues and thus transparency are still an important aspect (Drumwright, Murphy 2009). In other words, one of the main tasks for critique and the ethics of digital advertising is to provide transparency about the way these data are collected and used and, moreover, to get users informed about their rights and to give them an opt-out opportunity.

A second challenge for digital advertising, and currently often discussed, is native advertising, a form of advertising that matches the appearance of the platform on which it is published. In other words, within the practice of native advertising “advertisers create or sponsor content intended to blend in with the editorial content” (Carlson 2015, p. 850). This, of course, raises questions about the blurring of lines between editorial and business operations in the media. It is clearly associated with endangering journalistic ethics, or as Carlson (2015, p. 850) puts it: “The close connection between journalistic autonomy and authority supports a separation between a news organization’s editorial and business functions, both internally through their discrete operations and in the news product through the unambiguous marking of what is editorial and what is advertising. These distinctions feed into the strictures of journalistic professionalism and the ideal that journalists be left alone to control their jurisdiction without interference”. From the perspective of advertising ethics native advertising “betrays” potential consumers by pretending to be editorial content. This undermines the credibility of just the media that need to reach audiences; they somehow kill the golden goose. The growing practice of native advertising in digital media is the more surprising and thus superfluous as advertising has begun to be perceived itself as entertainment. So the question arises: what kind of audiences can really be reached with native advertising and what will be the “price” for this illusion and betrayal in the long run (see the chapter on brand journalism in this volume)?
3 Agents of Advertising Critique

A majority of advertising critique practices relate to images and visual communication: from ads depicting an excess of violence (so called shock advertising: Dahl et al. 2003, p. 268) to hypersexualized ads., e.g. children in sexualized postures (so called Lolita chic: Durham 2008) or a general “porn chic” (Gill 2007a, p. 73), to different kinds of “everyday” “-isms” such as exotism, post-colonial symbolism and hierarchies (Frith, Mueller 2010), and ageism (Carrigan, Szmigin 1999) – we see a multitude of different forms of offense in ads. Most of the ads violating ethics with regard to sexism; e.g. by sexualization without any product context (so called “eye-catcher advertising”), trivialization and depreciation of persons depicted through postures, objects, clothing, subtle or obvious slogans in the style of “old-boys’ jokes”, re-traditionalization using obsolete stereotypes which mainly depict women in obsequious poses. Also images of men as photo models or celebrities are almost exclusively assigned to a hegemonial manhood (Connell 2005): often young and white, slim, muscular, potent, heterosexual and financially independent – advertising subjects predominantly symbolize physical and mental strength, sportiness, risk and competition orientation, but also protection and safety. These traditional visual postures in advertising, although well known since the 1970s (Schmerl 1994, p. 134), are still alive, despite massive feminist, scientific and political critique.

The agents of advertising critique questioning these advertising practices and debating their individual and social consequences can be roughly categorized into three groups (besides legal regulation2): (1) actors of a general consumerism critique, (2) self-regulation by the branch itself, and (3) advertising interest groups of civil society.

4 Actors of a General Consumerism Critique

“The mercantile juggernaut has moved in or swarmed over (...) Our historically treasured cultural values are either viewed as marketing impediments – such as democratic tools for civic assertiveness – or are commandeered, co-opted, or outright commodified in the service of corporate profits.” (Ralph Nader quoted in Jacobson, Mazur 1995, p. 8)

2 This includes international law (e.g. CEDAW, UN law against discrimination of women in the media), European (e.g. EU guidelines on audiovisual media) and national law (e.g. Pornografiegesetz (BGBl), AMD-G, ORF-G, Gleichbehandlungsgesetz). For an overview and detailed information see Kappel 2013b and the chapter on trade practices and consumer disinformation in this volume.
Advertising critique has always been part of a general consumption and commercialization critique. It has been stated that commercialism and the dominant promotion of materialism (Jacobson, Mazur 1995) affect both consumers’ minds and extraction of natural resources leading to enormous levels of superfluous production. Within affluent societies a high level of throw-away products are manufactured, many of them depleting basic resources such as water, air, soil and land, oil, carbon and metal ores. As a consequence, it has been argued that advertising in general is stealing people’s time, especially children’s attention and, moreover, it engenders conformism. Furthermore, the structure of marketing and advertising is undermining civic institutions (Barber 2007) and the whole media system (Baker 1994; Bourdieu 1998; Collins 1992). As the main revenue source for the media, advertising affects all parts of society: professional sports, schools and universities, the public space, public transportation, arts, politics, even the structures of nonprofit organizations and religions. In this wider sense of (a more radical) advertising critique we have a variety of different actors and areas of tension, primarily focusing on advertising’s role in the commercialization and commodification of the public sector.

Advertising critique is closely connected with its role in a general “economization” of the public sphere. As an example, Galbraith (1958) outlined segregation in modern industrial societies between the public and the private sectors. In the public sector, especially in the Western capitalistic systems with their tradition of economic liberalism, free education, hospitals, public social welfare, public transportation and other services, go unfilled or become precarious: “The community is affluent in privately produced goods... It is poor in the public services” (1958, p. 315). With increasing financial pressure in the public sector, more and more former public responsibilities are actually reduced or “economized”. Marketing interests and advertising logics have thus filled up the new spaces of a commercialized environment in postmodern society.

This is also the subject of Habermas’ theory of a bourgeois public sphere (1990). It begins with the assumption that the public sphere needs public access by all citizens in order to guarantee access to knowledge, media, public spaces, rational considerations and information, access to communicative negotiations – free of domination and pari passu. Accordingly, Habermas believes that, ideally, better arguments should assert qua prudence and not the argument of the most powerful lobbyists or the advertising strategists with the most salient images in public spaces. The public sphere is thus not an arena of market based, but discursive relationships, a stage for debating and deliberating instead of buying and selling (Fraser 2001, p. 109). In other words and following this line of argument, if private organizations replace public institutions the democratic core
of civil liberty will be destroyed and – instead – be driven by market-based individual interests (Barber 2007). These presumptions do not only require an ongoing debate about the value of public goods, it also calls for the existence of a free (social) science independent of financial interests. Its actors should be free to reveal, describe and report the findings of independent investigations and normative appeals.

To sum up, intellectuals debating the role of advertising as a whole in the public sphere have always been important agents for the critique of advertising.

5 Self-Regulatory Institutions

“Tout s'achète: l’amour, l’art, la planète Terre, vous, moi […]” (Beigbeder 2000, p. 15)

The advertising industry addresses its responsibility for ethical standards through self-regulatory bodies. Self-regulatory bodies are typically established by the communication industry itself (e.g. media, advertisers, advertising and media agencies) and societal organizations (e.g. universities, lawyers, chambers of commerce) in order – according to their self-declarations – to maintain a high quality of advertising and ensure consumer trust and protection for the benefit of the industry as a whole. In the US the Federal Trade Commission – an independent agency of the US government – regulates advertising. This is complemented by the Advertising Self-Regulatory Council (ASRC; see Advertising Self-Regulatory Council 2016). In Europe many countries also have self-regulatory bodies that are responsible for listening to complaints from the public and establishing whether or not a particular ad or campaign should be withdrawn. In Europe, internal or self-regulation is implemented by the European Advertising Standards Alliance (2016), of which currently 38 self-regulatory bodies are members: 27 from 25 European countries and 11 from non-European countries, including India, Australia, Brazil, Peru, and Canada (Förster, Brantner 2016).

The various advertising councils follow ethic codices and self-regulatory principles. As an example, the ethical guidelines of the American Association of Advertising Agencies, funded in 1924 and revisited in 2011, proclaims: “Specifically, we will not knowingly create advertising that contains: a) False or misleading statements or exaggerations, visual or verbal, b) Testimonials that do not reflect the real opinion of the individual(s) involved, c) Price claims that are misleading, d) Claims insufficiently supported or that distort the true meaning or practicable application of statements made by professional or scientific authority, e) Statements, suggestions, or pictures offensive to public decency or
minority segments of the population.” (American Association of Advertising Agencies 2011). These criteria are generally embedded in most of the ethical codes of self-regulation in Western countries.

Through these self-regulatory bodies practitioners are not only – more or less – active players in advertising critique, but as agents of production so to speak, they are at the same time the subject of their own critique. This, of course, creates contradictions and conflicts of interest. The advertising industry is itself characterized by a multiplicity of specializations and consequent fragmentation, a general “youthism” within the creative scene and a high level of fluctuation. This is aggravated by the prevailing market logic, specific working conditions, aesthetic decisions, dependence on clients’ budgets and marketing goals. In fact, the main driver is “freshness” – new products, new aesthetic codes and the rupture of taboos and rules are the scoops of the advertising industry; they guarantee personal success. Criticizing your own business thus in no small measure comes with a risk. So we can assume that whistleblowing and a critical voice can only be afforded by those who do not risk losing their jobs or who are not subject to the adjustment pressure of big companies. Given this, self-regulatory institutions are even more important as a “safe haven” for those individuals active in advertising critique that have concerns about practices in their own guild.

6 Groups of Interest in Civil Society

In many cases the established self-regulation system was not able to modify the still extant offenses in advertising and myths such as “sex sells”. As an example, the European Council requested in this context higher ethical standards for the depiction of under-aged models with regard to the target group of girls and young women, but without creating new prohibitions or legal regulations for advertising. The Council takes three groups to task: advertisers as the producers, the media as distribution authority and the public as critical consumers (Council of Europe 2007). Hence, the question arises of how civil society accepts its responsibility in developing a higher sensitivity for offenses in advertising not only with regard to sexism, but advertising ethics in general.

6.1 Advertising Watch Groups

An example of civil engagement in advertising critique are the local watch groups, as established in Austria (Vienna, Graz and Salzburg). They provide a
platform for complaints regarding sexism in advertising. Based on Goffman’s seminal study (1979) and enhanced by newer empirical results regarding gender and stereotypes (Holtz-Bacha 2011; Kautt 2012; Schmerl 1994; Wilk 2002), a catalog of criteria has been developed by the group that serves as basis for decisions as to whether an advertisement is offensive or not (Kappel 2013a). The decisions of the group are published on the website, but are also picked up by the mass media.

6.2 Journalists and Amateurs

The Internet provides an open space within the battle for visibility, attention and prominence: anyone can write blogs or articles, and anyone can uncover grievances that may be picked up by professional journalists who catapult them into the mass media. Never before has it been so easy to reach audiences, to distribute messages, to communicate critical activities and to criticize companies, brands and international corporations. One of the more prominent examples is the mock advertising of a blogger who calls herself “The Militant Baker”. She took the style of advertising of Abercrombie & Fitch, known for not selling plus-sizes but for “cool, good-looking people”, and replaced it with herself and the slogan “Attractive & Fat” (see Figure 2). The campaign went viral and caught the attention of mass media outlets who then reported it. This demonstrates how the Internet helps individuals to express and publish their critique of advertising practices independently of the access barriers of traditional media.

Figure 2: Mock advertising (Burton 2013)
But the mass media and thus professional journalists also take action to bring ethical offenses in advertising to public attention. Just one example among many is the lemon, a negative award that dieStandard, an online outlet of an Austrian quality newspaper, has dedicated to sexist advertisements and media content since 2010.

6.3 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO)

NGOs are a significant part of a general consumerism and also of advertising critique. They include organizations for feminism, antiracism, anti-violence, consumer protection, or environmental groups. As an example, the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) (2016) is a non-governmental organization that denounces the working conditions of the garment industry worldwide and thereby criticizes global brands by showing the divergence between their advertisements and real production conditions. The first CCC group was founded in Amsterdam in the late 1980s as a reaction to the bad working conditions of textile workers, mostly female, in low-wage countries. The CCC was also successful in other countries and meanwhile there are Clean Clothes groups in 15 European countries. The central question of production conditions in globalized mass production also became popular when Naomi Klein published her book “No Logo” in 2000. She demonstrated that big brand corporations do not use profit margins to improve working conditions, but instead profits are diverted to marketing and advertising budgets. Hence Klein’s conclusion is that the new capitalistic competition of global players takes place at the advertising level in order to gain the attention of well-funded elites worldwide and in Western countries in particular as the central addressees of their products (Klein 2000). This macro-economic process described by Klein sixteen years ago, is still extant in international production. Although corporations and brands have weathered countless “shitstorms” following accidental deaths (e.g. in the textile industry) and have published many CSR reports about ecological responsibility and working conditions, this logic of production is still an on-going practice (Frith, Mueller 2010).

Besides work and human rights, especially in developing countries, the struggle for natural resources is central to consumer and advertising critique. In recent decades environmental groups have been active in order to prevent ecological damage, such as deforestation, soil erosion, unfiltered chemicals and toxic spills from industrial waste, land appropriation for mono cultures (palm oil, soy, cotton, etc.) and genetically modified seeds and fertilizers (e.g., Monsanto, Novartis). One example from the number of NGOs, environmental groups and individuals is Vandana Shiva, an Indian activist, physicist, biologist.
and receiver of the alternative Nobel Prize. She reported about the struggle of small farmers for essential access to water from the regional springs that were privatised to the Coca-Cola Corporation. This grassroots movement became public by first regional and then international media coverage. However, it was difficult to get the mass media to report the incident because Coca-Cola is an important advertiser and as such is important to a lot of media companies (Shiva 2002).

These examples illustrate two vital aspects: first, NGOs have an important role in advertising critique as they become more and more professional in their online communication activities. As such they are a source for critical journalistic reporting for the traditional media, but even more so for the growing alternative media (e.g. VICE). Second, the Internet is central to the independent publicizing of these practices and to the distribution of petitions against the destructive behavior of global players. Meanwhile there are various websites providing a platform to enter petitions (e.g. ipetitions.com; change.org). Petitions against advertising practices make up a large part of these websites, which illustrates that civil society is undeniably an important actor in advertising critique.

6.4 Educators

Another important group in active advertising critique are educators in kindergartens, schools and universities, as well as parents who engage in projects dealing with consumption critique, production conditions and participation in the economy. One main issue here is “pinkification” and “gender marketing” that perpetuates traditional role models for girls and boys. “Pink Stinks” for example, is a campaign against gender stereotypes in marketing, production and distribution, especially for children. A group of critical consumers and parents founded the initiative in Great Britain in 2012 and they mostly criticize advertising by the toy industry, e.g. Lego Friends, Barbie. The communication was almost exclusively conducted via Internet blogs and social media, but has been picked up by the traditional mass media. Meanwhile there are active “Pink Stinks” groups in Germany (Cologne, Hamburg, see Pink stinks 2015). The group thus stands for critical consumers who expect and convey gender equality and diversity in advertising and do so in the public space (Völzmann 2014). Pink Stinks organizes workshops in schools and theaters for children; they address their critique of stereotypes to the mainstream media, especially regarding specific TV shows. The group became famous in Germany and Austria with their protest against the casting show “Germany’s Next Topmodel” (Brummert 2016).
6.5 Artists

Another type of advertising critique is activism in the arts. It transports social critique to a different level and provides social criticism and new interpretations. Advertising in particular is a vital element of popular cultural critical formations making hip fashion regalia, body dramatics and the politics of the image visible and emotionally readable. Since Warhol’s Pop Art at least, the boundaries between commerce and art culture have been blurred. Artists pick up extremes in advertising representations; they reflect them and critically expose image reception. Also, political and symbolical activism such as “Subadvertisement” or “Culture Jamming” (Lasn 2005) and Adbusting (Klein 2000) are specific creative and subversive actions to imitate and thereby ironically treat brand communication. Meanwhile there are a number of critical magazines and websites that deal with this subcultural and dissident practice of advertising critique (Adbusters 2016).

7 Obstacles for Advertising Critique

The discussion shows that advertising critique is borne by a multiplicity of single activities and agents. Furthermore, research on advertising ethics takes place within different disciplines (such as marketing, communication science, sociology, political science, philosophy), mostly without reference to each other. But the question arises, of why advertising ethics and critique as subject of research seems to be at a dead end, as incipiently mentioned, revolving around the same themes and – finally – around itself. The reasons can primarily be located in three aspects: (1) the lack of objectivity, (2) the lack of acceptance, and (3) the lack of continuity.

7.1 The Lack of Objectivity

Advertising critique suffers from ambiguities of representation in visuals, language or their interaction. There are, of course, ethical offenses that violate our basic assumptions of what is right; i.e. they are wrong at first sight. These include for instance deception in advertisements, depictions of violence or sexual representations of children. But the majority of offenses in advertising depend on interpretation, they use traditional stereotypes and are thus sexist, they perpetuate outdated gender role expectations, operate with the objectification of women, depict disabled people as helpless victims, and thereby affect
our image of certain groups in society. This is closely connected with negotiated meanings in popular cultures and the feminist research into advertising that is rooted in this tradition. Furthermore and as an additional side note, in feminist research, objectivity as a quality criterion is seen as a hegemonic trick of male dominated science and the male dominated production of pictures, body representations and reading/decoding versions.

As an example, Laura Mulvey, a British feminist film theorist, employed Freud and Lacan’s ideas to the cinematic aesthetics of patriarchal Hollywood cinema and found two distinct modes of the male gaze in the 1950s and 1960s, i.e. “voyeuristic” (seeing woman as image “to be looked at”) and “fetishistic” (i.e. seeing woman as a substitute for “the lack”, the underlying psychoanalytic fear of castration). These “male gaze” narratives and aesthetics are still extant in both films and advertising, but have developed new forms of representation (Mulvey 1975).

Gill (2007b) speaks here of a postfeminist media culture “as a distinctive sensibility, made up of a number of interrelated themes. These include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a make-over paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference” (2007b, p. 147).

This transformation in depictions and representations makes it even harder to detect sexist offenses in advertising, or as Gill puts it: “feminism is now part of the cultural field… Feminist-inspired ideas burst forth from our radios, television screens and print media in TV […] However, it would be entirely false to suggest that the media has somehow become feminist and has adopted unproblematically a feminist perspective. […] What makes contemporary media culture distinctively postfeminist, rather than pre-feminist or anti-feminist is precisely this entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas […] A certain kind of liberal feminist perspective is treated as common sense, while at the same time feminism and feminists are constructed as harsh, punitive and in-authentic, not articulating women’s true desire.” (2007b, p. 161). The transformation of popular culture in postmodernism is characterized by ambivalence, double binds, ironic symbols and quotable repetitions (McRobbie 2009). Hence, unambiguity and consistency, requirements in quantitative science, are not quality criteria in themselves in this context of decoding in a broader process of social change. The latter leads us to the next “stumbling block” for advertising critique – the lack of acceptance.
7.2 The Lack of Acceptance

Advertising critique suffers from its lack of acceptance for different reasons. First, offensive advertising causes collateral damage in groups who do not fit into the target groups of heteronormativity, purchasing power and whiteness. These groups are not primarily the addressees or target group of most of the brands, but they are reached by the brand communication, they are affected by it and sometimes they feel humiliated and insulted. This is especially the case for groups such as ethnic minorities and their religious values, economically precarious individuals, the aged and physically disabled, LGBT communities. All of these see a heteronormative world of white, well-funded middle-class families or winner types of high status within the perfect idyll of product presentations. These groups are economically not as relevant as the target groups. Hence, it is not until it becomes an issue for the targeted groups that the ‘sensitivities’ of the collateral groups come to the fore, at least for the majority of brands. Second, the lack of acceptance of advertising critique is due to its perceived ineffectivity. Advertising critique always comes into play after an advertisement has been aired; thus the critique is always late. Advertising never comes to an end, even if campaigns are stopped, designs are criticized or visual practices are scandalized. In this logic of daily routines, advertising critique is always behind, trails behind stimuli and incidents – especially in digital environments. Third, advertising critique is not comfortable. It has the ideological stamp of a buzzkill: antiquated, priggish, critical of capitalism and thus tendentiously radical. This negative image of advertising critique could also be the reason for the brittle research traditions in this question that – consequently – leads to a lack of continuity in research (Holtz-Bacha 2011, p. 15; Blake 2015, p. 3).

7.3 The Lack of Continuity

Academic life and activities have their own logic and mechanisms. In times of financial cutbacks in universities, individual research activities are more and more driven by economic interests (e.g. contract research to be able to finance studies) and publication mechanisms. In other words, the subject of research topics is affected by the demands of the private sector of the economy (sometimes also by public funding institutions) on the one hand, and the current dominant themes in research areas on the other. Advertising ethics and critique is, despite of its growing relevance from a social point of view, not “en vogue” –
neither in practice nor in research. It is at best a subtheme, an imposition, as it
does not help to position the research in a competitive environment. In their
seminal article, Drumwright and Murphy (2009) investigated the current state
of advertising ethics. They interviewed industry and academic leaders, analyzed
agency websites, advertising textbooks and academic literature. As one of their
main findings they conclude: “Despite attention to issues of advertising ethics
through the decades, it would be a mistake to assume that advertising ethics
has received coverage commensurate with its importance. While advertising
ethics has been recognized for some time as a mainstream topic […], research
is thin and inconclusive in many important areas” (2009, p. 85).

To sum up, the question is whether advertising in the digital age leads
to more information or disinformation of consumers as individuals and – at
a macro level – as members of a society. In fact, the discussion has shown
that advertising and its critique is at a crossroads in the digital age with the
challenges sketched. The voices within this field always have been there and
are multifaceted. The Internet has helped to make these voices louder and thus
to provide a platform to participate in any form – from staying informed via
signing petitions against certain advertising practices, to becoming an advertis-
ing activist her- or himself. This supports the assumption that digitalization
increases transparency and thus information about advertising practices. At
the same time, the possibilities to collect data and to violate privacy increase.
Furthermore, it is getting harder for self-regulatory authorities to oversee the
highly fragmented field of digital advertising due to the sheer number of different
websites, apps, blogs et cetera and to take action against violations of their code
of ethics. So in contrast, these aspects underline the threat of a higher disinfor-
mation through digitalization in advertising. So far, a categorical answer cannot
be given to the question, but it can be supposed that advertising critique plays a
vital role in this area of tension. Right now, the role of research on advertising
ethics seems to diminish mainly due to the speed digital advertising and its
phenomena have developed. It has to be questioned whether the traditional
forms of scientific critique are still sufficient or whether we need newer ways to
stay relevant as a critical intellectual voice. This becomes even more acute as
advertising needs a constructive corrective in order to prevent an imbalance
between public and economic interests, or as Pollay formulates it more strik-
ingly: “Of all the aspects of advertising that might be studied, values have the
most profound implications and are the most meaningful to the larger academic
community and the community at large” (1987, p. 107).
**Publication Bibliography**


Blake, Christopher. 2015. Wie mediale Körperdarstellungen die Körperzufriedenheit beeinflussen. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.


