

Advertising Ethics and Consumer Behavior: A Study of Omani Society

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How to cite this article: Al Busaidi, Z. (2023). Advertising Ethics and Consumer Behavior: A Study of Omani Society. *CTD International Journal for Media Studies*, 1(1), 13-21

ABSTRACT

In the advertising world, ethics is a choice between good and bad, between right and wrong. It is governed by a set of principles of morality at a given time and place. Ethics is related to group behaviour in the ultimate analysis, setting norms for other individuals to follow in consistency with the group norms. An advertising communication is a mix of art and facts submissive to ethical principles. In order to be consumer-oriented, an advertisement will have to be truthful and ethical, and should not mislead the consumer. Seeing the dynamics of change and radical transformations in the advertising industry, I interviewed the academicians, students and general consumers of Oman to seek their opinion on the present status of advertising ethics. The leading Omani newspapers were analyzed to review the product and its consumer class to understand the ethical values of the advertisement.

This paper offers a critical analysis of the producers and consumers to understand their selling and buying motives. It is recommended that both the advertisers and producers of the product and services, individually and in consultation with one another, deal with not only the message of advertising, understand ethical problems and set norms to create a win-win situation for everyone.

Keywords: Advertising World, Ethics, Omani Society, Consumer

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Brief History of the Omani Society

The study of mass media in Oman will not be complete unless a brief understanding of the geopolitical fabrics, history and aspirations of the people of Oman is reviewed. The Sultanate of Oman lies on the Tropic of Cancer in the extreme southeast corner of the Arabian Peninsula. It occupies a mass land area of 309,500 square kilometres with mountain ranges, barren deserts, fertile lands and a stretch of 1,700 kilometres of coastlines. Oman shares its border with the Republic of Yemen, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Its strategically significant location in the Gulf of Oman and the Straits of Hormuz controls the waterways access to the countries of the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula (see Chart 1.1 below). Strategically at least 40 percent of the world's oil output goes through the Straits of Hormuz, a vital route for world oil supplies. In times of crisis, this strait becomes the world focus of news (Al-Abd, Atif, 1995).



Figure 1: Map of the Sultanate of Oman

The history of modern-day Oman dates back at least 5000 years when the land was known by various names as evidenced in various literature such as *Majan*, *Menzoun* and *Oman*. Omanis were believed to originate from the

Arab tribes who migrated to this territory from the Uman region of Yemen, while according to others it owes its name to Oman bin Ibrahim Al-Khalil descendants from Prophet Ebrahim (www.originoman.com).

Over the years many other tribes settled in Oman to make a living as fishermen and breeding live stocks. Many of the present Omani families can trace their ancestral routes to other parts of the Arabian Peninsula. To date, the Sultanate of Oman is divided into seven regions or 'wilayat' headed by a 'Wali' or elected governor in each 'wilayat' as representative of that region as illustrated in Chart 1.2 below (Al-Falahi, 1998).

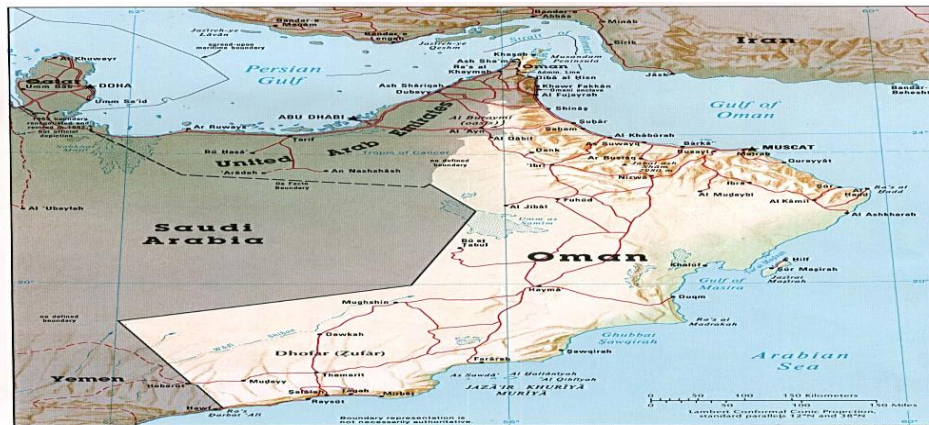


Figure 2: Map of The Sultanate of Oman by Wilayats (regions)

1.2 Population

The distribution of population in Oman vis-a-vis land area is divided by uneven topography with different parts of regions filled with wide areas of arid deserts and mountain ranges, thus making inhabitants and communication infrastructure difficult especially in the regions of Ad Dakhiliyah, Al Wusta, As Zahirah, Musandum and Dhofar. Together these regions make up 80 per cent of the land mass (256,700 square kilometres), with only about 26.5 per cent inhabitants (815, 416) as indicated in Table 1.

Fertile lands with densely populated areas are scarce, and approximately 20 per cent of this land accommodates 80 per cent of the population of just over three million people. These areas include Muscat, Al Wusta and Ash Sharqiyah in that order. The concentration of inhabitants is usually in the city areas like Muscat, Nizwa, Sohar, Sur, Ibri, Rustaq and Salalah. Mobility among Omanis is high. Over the last 10-year years, one of four Omanis changed their residence to another governorate. Muscat Governorate, the capital city attracted the highest proportion of inhabitants. About 31.5 per cent of Muscat's population was not originally from Muscat (Al-Kindi, 1995).

With the uneven distribution of population, areas such as arid deserts and mountainous terrain with limited access create difficulties in reaching the total population through mass media. The physical distribution of print media like newspapers and magazines in these areas is economically not feasible or even if it is, it would be challenging to reach. In addition, the conventional television and radio installation of 'transmission link stations' on the rough mountains across the country would be difficult. On the other hand, conventional print and electronic media are more accessible in heavy-density populated areas such as cities.

The construction of new infrastructure, such as roads, water, electricity, and telecommunication facilities, to support the growing population and improve the use of traditional mass media has been limited in many regions due to the challenging terrain. This can only be achieved through gradual, incremental efforts.

The presence of a high percentage of expatriates (likely half a million or about 16 per cent as indicated in Table 1) needed for the labour sectors added dimension to the equation. It invites entry for other vernacular media (newspapers, magazines, books, CDs', DVDs', movies etc.) other than Arabic language. These media originated from foreign countries like India, Pakistan, Philippines, USA and others, and are now available in the local market in Oman. While the alternative mass media are welcome to serve information needs for expatriates living and working in Oman, it does in a way create other issues in terms of contact, gatekeeping, censorship and control (Al-Mashiki, 1994).

1.3 Advent of Islam

In the case of Oman, Islam has been a dominant issue that shapes the lives of Omanis and the method they relate and communicate among themselves and to others. Many of the cultural communication practices seen today can be traced back to the influence of the Islamic faith.

However, the most outstanding means of propagating Islam from Oman were through the extensive trading and

maritime activities covering large areas in East African coastal regions. In the 19th century, Oman's sovereignty reached as far as the Island of Zanzibar (the present day Tanzania), Central Africa, China, Asia, India, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (The Empire of Aceh, The Malay Sultanate of Malacca - Malaysia and the Empire of Brunei – including the Southern Philippines) (www.wikipedia.org).

Traces of the influence are still existing to date. For example, as part of archaeological effects in Malaysia, it is believed that the popular sweet known as '*halwa muscat*' is derived its name from the port cities of Sohar and Muscat where these delicacies were brought by Arab traders through the largest port city in Oman at that time. These sweets were brought over by the merchants over trade. This sweet is very much similar found in today's Oman and has now become part of this nation's (Oman) cultural heritage.

On a more solemn note, the propagation of Islam thus spread through these merchant traders in most parts of the Southeast Asia Archipelagos. Traders not only spread the Islamic faith, they also introduce the following systems such as (i) the administrative system of governance, (ii) the introduction of the Islamic educational system of '*Madrasah*'- (iii) influence Islamic cultural practices, and values and morality, (iv) the Islamic law or '*shariah*' and (v) the influence of early development of Islamic literature and architecture to mention few, to these parts of the world. The faith of Islam has been the dominant factor set up in all aspects of everyday lives of these people in the region. Traces of these influences as mentioned above co-exist with the modern mass media today (Al-Mashekhi, 1996).

2. WHAT IS ADVERTISING?

In our daily lives, we see thousands of commercials on television and many ads on the internet, in magazines, on billboards, and in many other places. It means advertising is something more than a sales message that occupies the space in and around news stories, magazine features and TV programmes. In fact, advertising is a complex form of communication that operates with objectives and strategies leading to various types of consumer thoughts, feelings and actions.

Advertising is a form of communication intended to persuade an audience (viewers, readers or listeners) to take some action. It includes the name of a product or service and how that product or service could benefit the consumer, to persuade potential customers to purchase or consume that particular brand. Modern advertising developed with the rise of mass production in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (TNS Media Intelligence, 2007).

Advertising is also a kind of creativity. Some people say advertising is simply a way to sell the product- to announce what products are available, who made them, and where you go to buy them. Commercial advertisers often seek to generate increased consumption of their products or services through branding, which involves the duplication of an image or product name to associate associated qualities with the brand in the minds of consumers. Different types of media can be used to deliver these messages, including traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, television, radio, outdoor or direct mail; or new media such as websites and text messages. Advertising may be placed by an advertising agency on behalf of a company or other organization.

Non-commercial advertisers that spend money to advertise items other than a consumer product or service include political parties, interest groups, religious organizations and governmental agencies. Nonprofit organizations may rely on free modes of influence, such as a public service announcement.

3. BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ADVERTISING ETHICS

Advertising ethics has been defined as “what is right or good in the conduct of the advertising function. It is apprehensive with questions of what ought to be done, not just with what legally must be done” (Cunningham, 1999).

The subject of ethics in advertising has a long history, and many of the same ethical concerns and criticisms of advertising have persisted through many decades and into the twenty-first century. More than 55 years ago, F. P. Bishop, formerly a member of Parliament and editor of The Times of London, published one of the first books on advertising ethics where he chronicled several “moral indictments” of advertising: “It stimulates unworthy desires, misleads the consumer, and encourages “consumptions.” (Bishop, 1949). This 11-chapter book titled The Ethics of Advertising (1949) examined many of the issues that some believe still plague advertisers and agencies, and his introduction addresses what many would consider a major question currently facing advertising:

Advertising has come to occupy a key position in the great argument of today—the argument about the right equilibrium between social power and individual independence. Hitherto the effect of its use has unquestionably been to promote individual liberty, at the expense, some would say, of good order and social discipline (Bishop, 1949).

Another book by two journalists during that era dealt with ethics in business (Childs et al., 1954) and spoke

directly to advertising with the following:

The advertiser must accept some accountability for the confusion of values that is a symptom of our times of troubles. Words such as character, faith, belief, integrity, are used to commend the quality of beer and pills. If you buy a certain car you are exalted, exultant, magnificently at ease. In some instances the advertising mind is so inflexible that any criticism brings a sharp challenge as though it were heretical even to question.

About 45 years ago, Thomas Garrett, S.J. (1961), a philosophy professor and priest, examined numerous ethical problems of “modern American advertising,” including economic growth, persuasion, consumption, and potential monopoly power (Garret, 1961).

Around 35 years ago, Stephen Greyser (1972) outlined in a Harvard Business Review article various attacks and counterattacks on advertising, such as truthfulness, morality, and exaggeration. Shortly thereafter, Wright and Mertes (1974) edited an extensive compilation on advertising’s role in society and dedicated one section of eight articles to ethical views toward the subject (Gyeeyser, S. A., 1972).

From the 1980s through the present, two empirical streams of research on advertising ethics have developed. The larger of the two streams has focused on understanding consumers’ perceptions of potentially objectionable advertising—for example, ads with persuasive appeals, ads with idealized imagery, ads for dangerous products, and ads targeting children (see, e.g., Gulas and McKeage 2000; LaTour and Henthorne 1994; Tinkham and Waver-Larisay 1994; Treise et al. 1994). Hyman, Tansley, and Clark (1994) provided an overview of this work in a Journal of Advertising special issue on advertising ethics (Hyman, Michael, Richard Tansley and James W. Clark, 1994).

Debate concerning the nature and effects of advertising that characterized the early literature has continued in more current years. One perspective was offered by Kirkpatrick (1986), who argued that the charges against advertising of manipulative deception, persuasive coercion, and tasteless offensiveness resulted from hostility toward capitalism and egoism. He drew on Ayn Rand’s theory of rational egoism as a system of ethical =principles that can provide the best understanding and guidance in business decisions (Kirkpatrik, 1986).

In the early years of this decade, advertising ethics expanded to concerns about new media such as the Internet. Advertising Age columnist Bob Garfield (2003), who billed himself as advertising’s leading critic, wrote an irreverent book in which he coined such words as “advertrocities” and “shockvertising.” While his message was much broader than ethics, he did offer observations on campaigns and practices that he considered unethical, such as Benetton’s long-standing social issues campaign, political advertising, and sexism. Garfield’s major indictment of advertising was “dishonesty” (Garfield, 2003).

The advertising industry has been and continues to be an industry in the midst of radical transformation. It has experienced a host of organizational, geological, and technological Changes. Privately owned agencies led by great creative talent have given way to publicly owned holding companies with multiple agency brands and a plethora of marketing services that are led by businesspeople. Once primarily domestic in focus, the industry has undergone globalization as agencies have followed their clients to remote parts of the world. The advent of new technology has enabled new media to explode. Traditional mass media advertising is augmented by nontraditional approaches, such as product placement, viral marketing, direct marketing, and virtual community marketing on the Web. Given these dynamic changes, practitioners must confront the challenges of the new advertising world daily, and scholars are addressing the implications of revolutionary change. As such, many questions confront the field of advertising. One question is not always as obvious as others, but it is equally important. What is the state of advertising ethics? To answer it, we wanted a perspective that elicited the ideas of thought leaders, knowledgeable participants, and observers of the advertising industry. As such, we conducted in-depth interviews with leading practitioners and academics. We supplemented these data by reviewing advertising.

3.1 Who is a Consumer?

First, let’s clarify the terms. Consumers are people who buy or use products or adopt ideas that satisfy their needs and wants. Customers are specific types of consumers; they are people like Lux Soap devoted fans who buy that particular brand and patronize a specific store.

In a broad sense, consumer words are used for any individuals or households that use goods and services to create an economy within the society. The concept of a consumer is used in different contexts, so the usage and importance of the term may vary.

In the era of globalization, the advertising and marketing world consumer is known as the king of the marketplace. when business people and economists talk of *consumers* they are talking about a *person as a consumer*, an aggregated commodity item with small individuality other than that expressed in the buy/not-buy decision. However, there is a trend in advertising and marketing to individualize the concept. Instead of creating

broad demographic profiles and psychographic of market segments, marketers have started to engage in personalized marketing, permission marketing, and mass customization(Cross, 1997).

There is increasing backlash from the public over the use of the label "consumer" rather than "customer", with many finding it offensive and derogatory(www.mistinthearten.com, 2009).

In the law and politics “consumer” defined as a consumer is often restricted to living persons (i.e. not corporations or businesses) and excludes commercial users(Krohn Lauren,1995). A typical legal rationales for protecting the consumer is based on the notion of policing market failures and inefficiencies, such as inequalities of bargaining power between a consumer and a business(Overby, 2001). As all potential voters are also a part of consumers; consumer protection takes place in a clear political significance.

In India, the Consumer Protection Act 1986 differentiates a consumer as consuming a commodity or service either for his personal domestic use or to earn his livelihood. Only consumers are protected as per this act and any person, entity or organization purchasing a commodity for commercial reasons is exempted from any benefits of this act (consumervscustomer.com).

4. OBJECTIVES

The objective of the study is to know the ethics of the consumers of Oman is to encourage consumers and organizations to buy Oman-made goods and services wherever possible. It's not a difficult concept to sell. Simultaneously, finding out the ways how a company reaches the maximum number of consumers without violating the code of ethics of the market in Oman. The purpose and objective of the study is to intend to:

- Aware Omani consumers of the products made in Oman and build up national pride.
- Encourage Oman-based consumers to buy locally-made products, use local services and be local tourists to develop the economic importance of the country.
- Build brand loyalty for Oman-made products without violating the ethical rules of the country.
- Generate employment, economic, environmental and social benefits of buying locally-made products and services.
- Enable consumers to identify Oman-made products and to make an informed choice.
- Create Oman's based manufacturing capability.
- Reduce imports, especially of consumption goods.
- Sustain fuel expenditure for future sources of profits (summerdaddy.com).

Development of Oman Advertising Campaign

Logically, the advertising ethics concepts are not very much visible in Omani society. It requires lots of effort to create awareness and develop the importance of Oman-made products and services. This is the only way to encourage consumers and businesses to value the economic and environmental impact of buying Oman-made products and services.

A variety of marketing and communication channels will be used, these include: paid advertising, sponsorship, news media, press releases, editorials, print supplements, blogs, road shows, brochures, newsletters, e-bulletins, billboards, events, Origin Oman Week, posters and the Origin Oman website (www.originoman.om).

Target Audiences

The wide target audiences for the advertising ethics are:

- All that Omani consumers, are involved in buying and using consumer goods and services. It can be segmented in various ways (age; income; life-style; social class; gender; and life-cycle-stage)
- Retailers/resellers of local products.
- Omani businesses fraternity.
- The wider community and opinion leaders
- The advertiser and the publisher who are engaged in the advertising publishing industry in Oman.
- The youth market(www.originoman.om).

Table 1: Typical News Structure of Local English Newspapers 2010

Classification	Times of Oman (Average pages)	Observer (Average pages)	Muscat Daily (Average pages)	Oman Tribune (Average pages)
Local (Oman)	27.2 (12)	21.4 (6)	21.4 (6)	14.2 (4)
Public Guide (advertisements)	18.2 (8)	14.2 (4)	7.3 (2)	7.3 (2)
Business	16.0 (7)	17.8 (5)	14.2 (4)	14.2 (4)
Sports	11.4 (5)	14.2 (4)	14.2 (4)	14.2 (4)
Infotainment	9.0 (4)			10.7 (3)
Middle East Region	9.0 (4)		10.7 (3)	14.2 (4)
India	2.3 (1)	10.7 (3)	3.5 (1)	7.3 (2)
Pakistan	2.3 (1)	3.6 (1)		3.5 (1)
Asia		3.6 (1)		3.5 (1)
Europe	2.3 (1)	3.6 (1)		3.5 (1)
Americas	2.3 (1)		3.5 (1)	3.5 (1)
World		3.6 (1)	17.9 (5)	3.5 (1)
Lifestyles		7.3 (2)	7.3 (2)	
Total	100 (44)	100 (28)	100 (28)	100 (28)

Source: Times of Oman, Observer, Muscat Daily, Oman Tribune (Times of Oman,2010).

5. METHOD

Several methods were employed to observe the status of advertising ethics in industry and academia, including interviews with students; and common consumers. Simultaneously, analysis of ethical content in the newspapers and magazines published in Oman.

We assumed that in-depth interviews of thought consumers would recommend exclusive insights into the status of advertising today. Almost twenty common consumers and the same number of students from the College of Applied Science, Ibri were interviewed using a semi-structured interview came up to with extensive questions that enabled the informants to conclude what focus was important. Ten leading advertising practitioners were interviewed over the telephone or in-person to ascertain how they viewed the state of the field of advertising ethics. Five of the ten were senior executives in advertising agencies and five were working in advertising areas. We probed regarding three general topic areas: (1) the advertising ethics issues that they see as important at the present and in the future, (2) how one can create an agency that ropes ethical assessment making and (3) research that academics could conduct that would advance the field of advertising ethics.

Five faculty members, who are working with the College of Applied Sciences at Ibri were interviewed personally and examined three issues: (1) the method in which ethics content is integrated into the undergraduate and graduate levels, (2) issues associated to advertising ethics that they observe as essential now and in the future (3) research that academics could conduct to further the field of advertising ethics.

6. FINDINGS

Our reports on the findings from our interviews with advertising industry executives of Oman, academicians, students and are followed by the results of our analysis of the newspapers of Oman. Because the general perception of ethical decision-making and directions for future research are based on the interviews, they are reported as findings. The answer was yes—and no. Our informants drew a difference between traditional and new ethical issues. That is, despite changes, numerous of the traditional ethical issues are fundamentally the same. New and significantly different ethical issues are emerging as a result of the electronic environment, however. In our interviews, we rapidly saw another peculiarity. There are ethical issues related to the advertising message, and there are issues related to the advertising business. Message ethics has to do with creating and delivering the commercial message, while business ethics deals with the processes concerned with running the advertising agency. Are new issues related to messaging ethics different from traditional issues? Our informants influenced us that yes, new messaging ethics issues are different from traditional issues. Are new issues of business ethics different from traditional issues?

No, our data indicated that new issues are not different, but they often are different in degree when compared to traditional issues of business ethics; the risks, the rewards, and the temptations are often greater. In addition to message ethics and business ethics, our informants often brought up issues.

6.1 Message Ethics

The traditional challenge of advertising is to create a commercial message that is both effective in selling and truthful. Our industry leaders did not find this to be a difficult or confounding issue concerning advertisement as

mass media. In contrast, nevertheless, issues that are both difficult and confounding arise in the environment created by new and nontraditional media.

6.2 Traditional Media

The age-old question of truth in advertising as it relates to traditional media is professed to be simple and simple by industry leaders. Academics that we interviewed suggested otherwise, and there is debate in the scholarly literature, but industry leaders did not perceive truth in advertising in traditional media to raise difficult issues. As one respondent said: ‘‘the message must be true to what the product or service is. I shouldn’t say it is simple, but it is very simple to me. If you’re talking about existing communication models [mass media advertising]. I think that people are not very clear about a right thing regarding the advertising ethics.’’

The second respondent explained, ‘‘The philosophy with which we approach our work is embedded in the truth.’’

Yet another said, ‘‘Our job is to help our clients find the natural production in a product and to tell that in an ethical way

These checks and balances include laws, regulatory oversight, self-regulation, media guidelines, and various other policing mechanisms. Academics, however, were not as optimistic as practitioners concerning issues related to truth in advertising in traditional media. One academic voiced his concerns:

I don’t think that we are specific about what unreliable advertising is, what we can allow and what we cannot allow. I see a lot of advertising, and I am just horrified that it is even allowed. I say to myself, ‘‘We make a big deal about deception in some areas, and in other areas, we just glitter and twist our heads and don’t clamp down.’’ Sometimes it’s politically driven; it depends upon certain industries that are lobbying.

The ethical issues offered in advertising are different. Industry leaders perceived ‘‘a host of ethical issues arising out of the Internet and the blogosphere we live in.’’ The concerns have largely to do with the absence of checks and balances, the advertiser’s loss of control, transparency, and privacy. Moreover, no consensus has emerged regarding what is ethical behaviour, and there is no sense that industry participants are collaborating to build consensus on these topics.

Another advertising executive lamented the lack of ethics demonstrated by some consumers and noted the increased importance of a defensive role for advertisers and their agencies.

There is so much going back and forth between consumers on Internet advertising that shouldn’t be from any perspective of ethics, authenticity, or morality. Advertising has to be doubly careful about what it associates its client’s products and brands with. Because Oman’s mobile kind of internet even blocks simple messages and pictures. They are using block side management kind of network to stop advertising in the name of ethics. In the real sense, they don’t know what the ethics in the advertising world is.

Knowledge about consumers is power, and that power can easily be ill-treated, particularly in a world of one-to-one communication:

7. DISCUSSION

The state of ethics in advertising, or in any profession for that matter, will always be a matter of importance and an area for disagreement. We do believe, however, that our informants and other sources of information have raised significant issues that we discuss below.

7.1 Traditional Versus New Media

Industry and academic leaders disagreed regarding whether the ethical problems in traditional media have been solved. Recent regulatory and legal activity is a testament to the fact that ethical problems can and do continue in traditional media. Ethical problems no longer occur in traditional media or when they do it can be explained by a ‘‘bad apple’’ is perhaps a simplify. In any event, letting down one’s guard is risky. Constant vigilance in traditional media is necessary.

The extent to which our industry leaders agreed that ethical problems in new media need to be confronted and determined was remarkable. It is yet another indication that ‘‘advertising’s future is now,’’ the digital revolution is finally taking place and the media environment is being reshaped (Vollmer, 2006).

7.2 Education: Students and the Professional

From our interviews with academic leaders, we were struck by the concerns that a focus on ethics would create doubts among students regarding the advertising profession and/or render them so idealistic that they would be less likely to succeed in the profession. This is a question for research. The experience of the authors is just the opposite, however. More specifically, students are well aware of public doubts about the advertising and marketing communication professions from the reactions of their friends and families. Confronting ethical concerns overtly and helping students develop the skills and confidence to deal with these issues effectively

mitigates students' doubts about the profession. There are curricula designed to help students develop the skills to analyze ethical problems. Ethics in advertising is a specialized practice matter and must be conceptualized as such by academics and students.

8. CONCLUSION

Advertising ethics is a frequently growing area, and the tempo of change in the advertising industry has rarely been greater or more revolutionary than in modern years. We were sobered by the point made by one of our informants: In an era of globalization, if proactive steps are not taken to set and implement industry norms in Oman, like other countries set up the norms proliferating media technology then rights and ethics will be diluted in Oman. Whether the norms involve ensuring transparency and protecting privacy in new and nontraditional media or creating ethical organizational cultures and encouraging ethical behaviour by individuals, the advertising industry must embrace its farm duties and take more of a leadership role in Oman. Norm setting should be both purposeful and mutual. In the strength of message and exchange of ideas, both industry and academia must become more practical, independent and in consultation with one another, in dealing with ethical problems and in setting norms. While this has always been needed, we assert that it rarely has been as important as today because of changes in the structure of the advertising industry, the advertising as the advent of new media, and the increase of knowledge more commonly. Industry leaders, academics, students, and media executives may not agree concerning the state of advertising ethics or what is ethical. Difference is not the problem; escaping the topic and/ or failure to connect in a joint dialogue is the problem.

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