

PERCEPTIONS OF ETHICAL PROBLEMS AMONG ADVERTISING EXECUTIVES IN CHILE: A REPLICATION OF A U.S. STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Advertising executives have to deal with potential ethical dilemmas. In the U.S. two studies have addressed this issue. The first, done by Rotzoll and Christians (1980) and the second done by Hunt and Chonko (1987). Both studies found that executives faced several ethical problems in their daily work.

In LDCs, and particularly in Latin America we know of no specific study that has addressed this topic. This paper presents the results of a study done in Chile, with the double objective of finding out what Chilean advertising executives perceived in terms of ethical problems and also to perform a comparison between their problems and those reported by the U.S. advertising executives. In order to accomplish both tasks, we chose to replicate Hunt and Chonko's study.

The data was gathered in the last weeks of 1992, through a self-administered questionnaire targeted at top-level executives of the advertising agencies affiliated to ACHAP (Chilean Association of Advertising Agencies). The response rate was 69 percent. A Spanish translation of the same open-ended question was used. At the same time, the ethical problems reported by the local executives were coded according to the same categories used by Hunt and Chonko.

A comparative analysis of the responses of both countries' advertising executives showed a very similar pattern. Both the rank-order and the frequency of each problem were alike. The three major concerns were: treating clients fairly; difficulties in creating honest, non-misleading, socially desirable advertising and representing clients whose products or services are unhealthy, unneeded, useless or unethical.

However, under this apparent broad pattern of similarity, some differences were found as illustrated by the following two examples. The difficulty in creating honest, non-misleading, socially desirable advertising dealt in Chile with puffery. In the U.S., instead, the same ethical problem dealt with gender and racism concerns, two issues not mentioned at all by the Chilean executives. Representing clients whose products or services are unhealthy, unneeded, useless or unethical in the U.S. was associated with products such as tobacco, liquor, "junk foods," and political candidates. In Chile, there was no such association, but rather, it referred to the general issue of wasteful spending.

As a final remark, it is worth noting that both studies found that there were advertising executives who explicitly reported having no major ethical problems in their daily work.