SHAPING A BETTER TOMORROW THROUGH ETHICS IN DESIGN EDUCATION

Rudi de Lange and Cwayita Swana

Faculty of the Arts. Tshwane University of Technology. Pretoria, South Africa.
delangerw@tut.ac.za; cwayitaswana928@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

Design education primarily concerns itself with training students in the practice and theory of a particular discipline. These students are not exposed to ethical codes of conduct to the same degree as students, for example, in architecture and medical sciences. They concern themselves with gentrifying communication and marketing messages, and are not required to question the right or wrong behind a product or message. The notion of design giving back to the place from whence it operates, or to contribute willingly to the good of society, seems to be in conflict with design's commercial, profit-driven and purely functional ethos. We argue that it is because of the lack of promulgated professional bodies, and enforceable ethical codes, that a course in design ethics is essential. This paper, in addition to arguing for ethics in the design profession, presents the ethos and outline of a planned undergraduate course on ethics and design.

Keywords: Ethics, Design education, Codes of conduct

1. ETHICS AND DESIGN

The practice of design displays a wide and varied nature and ranges from the industrial disciplines such as automotive design and architecture, to those that are visually based, such as packaging, interior, advertising and information design. The arguments presented and recommendations proposed in this paper are primarily aimed at the advertising and information design disciplines. Students in these fields, in general, receive training in the practice and theory of design and are not exposed to ethical codes of conduct in the same manner as, say, architects (where safety is a key issue) or the various professional and semi-professional practitioners attached to the medical profession (where doing no harm is a guiding tenant). Unlike professions that have to deal with moral-ethical issues (such as the medical profession), designers are more concerned with gentrifying communication and marketing messages and are not ipso facto required to question the right or wrong behind the product concerned or their design artefact. Design by nature, then, is a utilitarian discipline and is in servitude to the client. The notion of design giving something back to the place from whence it operates, or to contribute willingly to the good of society, is, it would seem, contrary to or in conflict with its commercial, profit-driven and purely functional ethos.

We assert that advertising design in particular lacks an ethic-moral disposition, a disposition which is part and parcel of other disciplines such as architecture, law, and the medical sciences. It is

highly unlikely that an architect will knowingly or willingly design a building that will endanger the safety of the end-user. The scope and sophistication of deceptive and misleading advertising, in contrast, attest to the lack of similar and/or appropriate ethics in advertising design (for examples refer to the rulings of the advertising self-regulators in the United Kingdom, Australia and South Africa).

Those working in occupations that are overseen by promulgated professional bodies, such as evidence-based medical practice, the legal profession, pharmacy and the architectural profession, are normally required to register with a regulatory professional body before they are allowed to practice (such as the local Health Professions Council of South Africa, the Law Society of South Africa, or the South African Council for the Architectural Profession). These professional bodies have the authority to deregister or disbar members as a result of (professional) misconduct, have the authority to investigate complaints lodged against its members, and can impose penalties and recommend corrective action. These bodies, in addition to their legislated power, require members to subscribe to a strict code of professional and ethical conduct. Evidence-based medical practice, for example, subscribes to the non-maleficence principle of *primum non nocere* (first, do no harm) and requires its members to honour the Hippocratic Oath. Teachers in South Africa are, on their part, obliged to report child abuse, even if they just suspect it. Individuals working in the advertising and information design fields, in general, are not required to belong to promulgated professional bodies. We argue that it is because of the lack of promulgated professional bodies, and enforceable ethical codes, that a course in design ethics is essential to begin to infuse (advertising and information) design students (our future design practitioners thus) with an ethic-moral disposition concerning their occupation and their design output. The arguments and ideas in this paper are furthermore influenced by South Africa's socio-political environment (as shaped by its history), the design education practice in South Africa, and from an information and advertising design perspective.

Some designers do question design's unidirectional, commercially driven culture, and at times its unethical and overtly outcomes-based or utilitarian approach to design briefs. Milton Glaser's *The Road to Hell*, and Ken Garland's *First Things First* present a glimpse of the internal struggles designers encounter when busying themselves with harmful and unethical design practices. We should then, sincerely question whether it is ethical to design items such as inert weight-loss products or to, for example, promote poor nutritional food to children (Glaser 2005; Garland 1964). Must we accept a design assignment when it is lucrative but unethical? Milton Glaser (2005), in his seminal essay aptly titled *The Road to Hell*, offered a good example when he questioned whether one must design "… a package aimed at children for a cereal whose contents you know are low in nutritional value and high in sugar." Accepting such a brief would require a designer to display (misleading or deceptive) nutritional claims, possibly quite prominently, on the front face of the packaging, to use friendly, attention-grabbing and inviting cartoon characters juxtaposed against bright colours, and to promote toys and give-aways in order to appeal to children. Such a design approach will make children (and sometimes even their parents or caretakers) believe that the cereal is healthier or more nutritious than it really is (Dixon, Scully, Niven, Kelly, Chapman, Donovan, Martin, Baur Crawford and Wakefield 2013). Children are also more likely to — to put it mildly — overenthusiastically require of their parents to buy cereals

displaying cartoon characters, because they consider cereals displaying these characters to be more appetising than cereal with plain packaging (Lapierre, Vaala and Linebarger 2011). Jean Piaget's (1896-1980) *Cognitive Developmental Theory* in part explains why one should regard the above marketing techniques as deplorable and exploitative. Children from about two to seven years of age portray their environment through symbols and make-believe play (Berk 2009). Their natural imaginative world can be seen on cereal packaging with anthropomorphised characters and a playful theme. Children in this age bracket find it difficult to exercise self-control, and so press their parents for products advertised in this manner (Valkenburg and Cantor 2001). Accepting such a brief should place a reflecting designer at an ethical crossroads, not just because one misleadingly promotes low nutritional food as being healthy, but because one exploits children that do not have the capacity to realise that they are being deceived.

2. THE ETHOS OF A COURSE IN ETHICS

The underlying ethos of a course in ethics for designers should not just mimic traditional business ethics, but should rather entrench honourable and virtuous principles. Such an ethos could stem from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) motto to build peace that is based on "humanity's moral and intellectual solidarity" (UNESCO n.d.). In a similar manner, the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (icsid n.d.) encourages designers to service humanity. Its vision is "to create a world where design enhances our social, cultural, economic and environmental quality of life." Robert Muller (1923-2010), a United Nations Assistant General Secretary for 40 years, developed *The World Core Curriculum* (UNESCO 2010). This curriculum advocates that education should not merely groom the mental capacity of students, neither should it train them to be pawns of a commercial society, but that students must be infused with a holistic approach. To this end, they must embrace values such as truth, understanding, humility, liberty, respect for life, compassion and altruism. In light of the above, an appropriate ethos of an ethics course in design should focus on preparing principled designers.

Unethical design practices are especially problematic in the African context when contrasting the exploitative nature of misleading advertising and the African philosophical-ethical concept of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is a traditional African concept encompassing social values (Mokgoro 1998) such as sharing, and promoting peace in a community. It is furthermore described as African humanism (Gaylard 2004) and is a foundation for "a morality of co-operation, compassion, communalism and concern for the interests of the collective respect for the dignity of personhood, all the time emphasising the virtues of that dignity in social relationships and practices" (Mokgoro 1998: 3). Some argue that the concept has poor contemporary value because it has a low regard for individual freedom and its anachronistic orientation is based in pre-colonial times (Metz 2011). Nevertheless, the values promoted by *Ubuntu* should not be seen as belonging to a particular culture or period. There is no harm done in practising goodwill and caring for others, and indeed these values can transpose to other cultures and times — as such (the values espoused by) *Ubuntu* is not only valuable and meaningful as African concept, but indeed as a universal concept. *Ubuntu* values are clearly in conflict with the unidirectional approach of design that students (on at least the African continent) are taught. Essentially, the philosophy of advertising and information design is about serving the customer, and at times at the expense of the end-user. One can sense

that the spirit of *Ubuntu* is lost to a great extent in the commercial and profit-driven world of design. This sense of loss is aptly addressed by David Berman's influential book, *do good ~~design~~* [sic] in which he calls for designers to choose well and "don't just do good design, do good" (Berman, 2009:157).

3. THE OUTLINE OF A COURSE IN ETHICS

The aim of the proposed undergraduate course in ethics would be to inform and expose students to universal ethical praxes and principles that are applicable to design. Such a course will undoubtedly reach beyond professional conduct such as dealing with one's customers and competitors, invoicing, self-promotion and how to treat one's employees. An undergraduate course in ethics should furthermore sensitise students so that they can make informed and principled decisions. We propose that the content of such a course could cover five major areas, namely (i) codes of professional practice; (ii) advertising self-regulation and misleading advertising; (iii) universal ethics; (iv) plagiarism and corruption; and (v) objectification, feminism, and discrimination.

3.1. CODES OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Despite our earlier cautionary sentiments regarding unethical conduct in the design world, we must acknowledge that there are a number of design associations that expect their members to act in an ethical manner and to give back to society. Familiarising students with these associations and their codes of conduct will invariably sensitise students to appropriate ethical conduct. Notable design associations that imbed moral-ethical conduct in their professional codes are the Malaysian *Code of Professional Conduct* (COPC) and the American Institute of Graphic Arts' (AIGA) *Standards of Professional Practice* who expect their members to devote some of their time to serve their respective communities. Designers that subscribe to the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada's (GDC) *Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct* may not take part in design that disregards the safety and health of their communities. The International Council of Societies of Industrial Design's (icsid) *Code of Professional Ethics* requires members to consider the well-being of society as well as the end-user. The International Council of Design (ico-D) and the Australian Graphic Design Association's (AGDA) *Code of Ethics* expect their members to consider the ecology and natural environment. It is significant to note that the *Code of Practices* drafted by the Association of Accredited Advertising Agencies of Hong Kong specifically prohibits product endorsement by medical practitioners, a common unethical and misleading practice that some marketers in South Africa unfortunately do use to advertise weight-loss and pseudo-medical products.

3.2. ADVERTISING SELF-REGULATION AND MISLEADING ADVERTISING

Most developed countries have implemented advertising self-regulation to keep marketing communication honest, truthful, legal and decent. Consumers and competitors are able to use advertising self-regulatory codes and processes to deal with issues such as misleading advertising or when a competitor abuses the goodwill of another manufacturer. Advertising self-regulation, however, is not merely an issue of honesty, decency, legality and truthfulness. A company may suffer financial and social harm if it is, for example, required to withdraw a television advertisement after a successful consumer or competitor complaint. Typical content of such a

section could include the International Chamber of Commerce (2015) *Consolidated ICC Code* for advertising and marketing, the *Code of Practice* of the Association of Accredited Advertising Agents of Hong Kong (HK4As 2015), and the advertising codes of a country's self-regulatory bodies in which a student may work in the future. Students should also take note of the recent revised Advertisement Law of the People's Republic of China that came into effect on 1 September 2015 (Peoples Republic of China 2015). The typical outcome would be for students to demonstrate that they have a good understanding of the principles that underlie advertising self-regulation (and state regulation where applicable), why advertising self-regulation is necessary, and where to obtain the applicable regulatory codes. Students, as future designers, must also be able to advise their clients on the procedural aspects related to lodging complaints with self-regulatory bodies, or with promulgated bodies if aspects of design and advertising are regulated via state promulgated statutory regulations.

3.3. UNIVERSAL ETHICS

Ethics and morality are sometimes confused. Whereas a moral choice is determined by an individual's own internal position of what is right or wrong, an ethical decision is determined by a set of rules. Such a set of rules is determined by a society, an organisation or a group of individuals within the context of their activities and their time of existence. It was ethically acceptable for North American cotton growers to own slaves in the 1800s, but it is highly unethical in the 21st century to engage in or even advocate such a practice as slavery. Euthanasia may be permissible and legal in some countries, but some doctors may still nonetheless refuse to assist terminally ill patients due to their own moral conviction. An action may be ethically permissible in a particular society and time, for example the Charlie Hebdo cartoons, but may not necessarily be the best action. Whilst religious parody would be ethically permissible as an advertising appeal in Western Europe (Griffin and Berry 2003), it will create sectoral offence and may attract harsh penalties in countries where religious dogma dominates a society.

There are, however, some ethics that are universally applicable and that are relatively free from cultural and religious constraints. In this regard Kinnier, Kernes and Dautheribes (2000) developed a short list of universal values or ethics that should enjoy universal acceptance. They considered world religions, philosophies, the work of a number of scholars and secular organisations and proposed five universal values of which one is the well-known Golden Rule (*do unto others as you would have them do unto you*, i.e. respect for others). Students should, in addition to universal ethics, be exposed to those ethical values espoused in their own countries. They should also have knowledge of the ethical principles of any countries in which their future work may appear, for example respect for the monarchy in Thailand, and practices that govern relationships such as in the Gulf Countries. Know-how of greenwashing (or green muting), brand stretching, sustainability and social responsibility (McAvery Kane, 2010) will enhance a student's perspective on ethics and design. As an outcome, students must demonstrate that they are aware of cultural and religious nuances that will affect the acceptance or rejection of their designs. Equally important is students' understanding that what is ethically permissible may not always be the best design decision, and that a consumer's moral disposition may override a designer's ethical position.

3.4. PLAGIARISM AND CORRUPTION

Most countries have enacted laws that protect the intellectual property of its citizens and that of foreign companies operating in those countries. These acts would normally cover copyright, patents, trademarks and functional and aesthetic designs. Abusing the goodwill of companies is a practice that is noticeable in package design (through the act of deliberately or even negligently passing off ones product or service as that of a competitor). Such design practices may produce short-term financial gain for the company that mimic the pack design of a competitor, but it will eventually attract litigation and accompanying financial penalties. Consumers do not appreciate being deceived and do not respond favourably towards copycat or parasitic products. Most advertising self-regulatory codes allow competitive advertising, especially where a competitor uses puffery and humour. Good examples are the well-known Cola Wars between the Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo. Consumers appreciate and respond favourably towards carefully constructed puffery and humour in advertising (Weinberger and Gulas 1992). It would be far more prudent and economically viable to follow such a route rather than plagiarising the ideas and designs of a competitor. Plagiarism is not just an ethical issue, it is a practice that will damage the professional reputation of a designer and the company accused of exploiting the goodwill of their competitor. A plagiaristic practice in design will eventually cause financial harm to those involved. This sub-section of a course in ethics and design should ideally cover aspects such as intellectual property, applicable legislation, an overview of plagiaristic practices in design, and the potential professional and financial harm of such a practice. As an outcome students must know how to protect their client's design interest through, for example, registering a trademark. They should also know the steps one must follow to lay a complaint with a country's advertising self-regulator if and when a competitor plagiarised a design, or part of a design.

Corruption in the form of cronyism or receiving and giving kickbacks diminish the professional status of a design discipline. These practices may be minimal in countries with a low corruption index, but are especially widespread in countries where compromised governments are clients, where they favour designated groups as preferred suppliers of design services and where there is a benevolent, patriarchal and paternalistic culture. A position against corruption is what a person must adopt early in life and it may not be possible to inculcate an anti-corruption position where a student has already taken a decision.

3.5. OBJECTIFICATION, FEMINISM, AND DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES

Projecting women as objects for commercial exploitation has become a matter of course in Euro- and some Asia-centric consumer advertising. This practice is particularly dominant in weight-loss, cosmetics, and some consumer advertising aimed at women. Whilst we acknowledge that it will be next to impossible to reverse this trend, students must be aware that the repeated exposure to the slim-ideal and sexually objectified imagery causes social and emotional harm, especially to young female viewers (Kroon Van Diest and Perez 2013). Media's idealisation of unrealistic female beauty and sexuality is a contributing factor to eating disorders, low self-image, depression and an unrealistic and unattainable drive for slimness and beauty (Tiggermann and Pickering 1996; Ahern, Bennett and Hetherington 2008). The content of this sub-section could typically include Frederickson and Roberts's (1997) objectification theory, an overview of the first, second and third

wave of feminism, and a synopsis of institutionalised and societal discriminatory practices such as Nazism, Fascism, Apartheid, slavery, affirmative action as retribution, and xenophobia. As an outcome of the proposed course, students should demonstrate an awareness of the harm imparted by objectification and discriminatory practices, and how design can be used as a social agent to counter these exploitative practices, rather than to use design to give credence to objectification and discrimination.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Just as modern medical practice moved from a "snake oil", superstition-herbal remedy practice, to an evidence-based practice with high ethical standards, so should design move from a utilitarian, and servitude position, to a practice where designers question the product or service they are to promote and where they command respect and add value to society. Designers should not be a vehicle through which marketers dispose of inferior products, mislead consumers and exploit the naive and less informed. Neither should they be a vehicle that assists totalitarian and oppressive regimes to exercise control. It should be a value-added profession whose members actively contribute to the progress of society and willingly give some of their time and talent to the upliftment and benefit of others.

Design educators are ideally positioned to address the conflict between ethics and design's position in a commercial utilitarian environment. Design educators can provide guidance to future designers as to what position they could take and how their conduct can contribute to the betterment of society. Designers should, as Glaser (2005), question whether they just want to make a pack appear bigger on a shelf or whether they should rather use their talents to participate in design that adds value to society. Including ethics in design education, but not just ethics as a guide to professional design conduct, but ethics that considers the end-user, will over time permeate the advertising and information design fields and develop integrity for the discipline.

REFERENCES:

Ahern, A.L., Bennett, K.M. and Hetherington, M.M. (2008) Internalization of the Ultra-thin Ideal: Positive Implicit Associations with Underweight Fashion Models are Associated with Drive for Thinness in Young Women. *Eating Disorders*, 16:294-307.

Bergman, D. (2006) *do good ~~design~~*. [sic] Berkeley. New Riders. Published in association with AIGA Design Press.

Berk, E.L. (2009) *Child Development*, 8th ed, Pearson, Boston.

Dixon, D., Scully, M., Niven, P., Kelly, B., Chapman, K., Donovan, R., Martin, J., Baur, A.L., Crawford, D. and Wakefield, M. (2013) Effects of Nutrient Content Claims, Sports Celebrity Endorsements and Premium Offers on Pre-adolescent Children's Food Preferences: Experimental Research. *Pediatric Obesity*, 9:e47-e57.

Fredrickson, B.L. and Roberts, T.A. (1997) Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21(2):173-206.

Garland, K. (1964) *First Things First*. A facsimile copy of Garland's manifesto is available at: http://www.designishistory.com/1960/first-things-first/. Accessed 26 June 2015.

Gaylard, R. (2004) (African) Humanism, Ubuntu and Black South African Writing. *Journal of Literary Studies*, 20.3/4:265-282.

Glaser, M. (2005) *The Road to Hell*. Paper presented at the AIGA National Design Conference, Boston 2005. New York. Milton Glaser Inc.

Griffin, J. and Berry, E.M. (2003) A Modern Day Holy Anorexia? Religious Language in Advertising and Anorexia Nervosa in the West. *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 57:43-51.

HK4As. (2015) http://www.aaaa.com.hk/en/abouthk4as/codeOfPractice.php.

International Chamber of Commerce ICC (2015) Consolidated ICC Code. http://www.codescentre.com/icc-code.aspx.

International Council of Societies of Industrial Design (icsid). n.d. *About*. Available at http://icsid.org/about/about/articles32.htm, Accessed 21 September 2015.

Kinnier, R.T., Kernes, J.L. and Dautheribes, T.M. (2000) A Short List of Universal Values. *Counselling and Values,* 45:4-16.

Kroon Van Diest, A.M. and Perez, M. (2013) Exploring the Integration of Thin-ideal Internalization and Self-objectification in the Prevention of Eating Disorders. *Body Image*, 10:16-25.

Lapierre, A.M., Vaala, E.S. and Linebarger, D.L. (2011) Influence of Licensed Spoke Characters and Health Cues on Children's Ratings of Cereal Taste. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med*, 165(3):229-234.

McAvery Kane, E. (2010) *Ethics: A Graphic Designer's Field Guide*. New York. Campbell Hall.

Metz, T. (2011) Ubuntu as a Moral Theory and Human Rights in South Africa. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 11: 532-559.

Mokgoro, J.Y. (1998) Ubuntu and the Law in South Africa. Paper delivered at the first Colloquium Constitution and Law. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Johannesburg.

Peoples Republic of China. 2015. Advertisement Law of the People's Republic of China (as amended on September 1, 2015) http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-04/25/content_2852914.htm

Tiggermann, M. and Pickering, A. (1996) Role of Television in Adolescent Women's Body Dissatisfaction and Drive for Thinness. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 20(2):199-203.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). n.d. Available at http://en.unesco.org/about-us/introducing-unesco, Accessed 20 September 2015.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2010) *The World Core Curriculum*, available at http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/mods/theme_c/popups/mod18t01s03.html Accessed 17 September 2015.

Valkenburg, M.P. and Cantor, J. (2001) The Development of a Child into a Consumer. *Applied Developmental Psychology*, 22:61-72.

Weinberger, M.G. and Gulas, C.S. (1992) The Impact of Humor in Advertising: A Review. *Journal of Advertising*, 21(4):35-59.