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Does Ethics Exist in Marketing?: A Comparative Genre Analysis

Marketing ethics is quite literally what it sounds like, applying the moral principle of ethics to marketing practices. The question is, why does that matter? This is a generation inundated with technology and knowledge. The average person sees about 5,000 advertisements a day According to the article “Anywhere the Eye Can See, It's Likely to See an Ad” by Louise Story, published in the *New York Times*, the average person sees about 5,000 advertisements a day. Advertisements include commercials, social media, billboards, etc. Each of these advertisements was created by a marketing executive who spent time carefully planning each detail; who they were targeting, what the message would be, what platform it would be broadcasted on, and a myriad of other details. Marketing ethics are the moral guidelines for which these decisions are based upon, as their ramifications can impact the lives of consumers. The American Marketing Association has a written code of ethics; however, this code is limited to the black and white letter of the law and does not address the vast gray area of interpretation within marketing. Practitioners of marketing are actively examining what the scope of ethics is and how it should be treated by advertisers.

The issue of ethics has been discussed on a multitude of forums, including business-oriented websites, such as Entrepreneur, scholarly articles, as well as editorial cartoons. The varying mediums provide an opportunity to investigate a comparative rhetorical analysis of the diverse genres. Three relevant texts would be John F. Gaski’s “Does Marketing Ethics Really Have Anything to Say? - A Critical Inventory of the Literature” published in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, Aaron Haynes’ “Only Ethical Marketing Will Stand the Test of Time” published on the website *Entrepreneur*, and Wiley Miller’s cartoon “Note to self: Never Ask a Parent an Ethics Question When Planning a Career in Advertising.” Each piece of literature is in a distinct genre that is characterized by a number of elements including audience, purpose, word choice, and structure. Various genres may have similarities in their elements, but ultimately have a unique combination within each piece of literature.

Different genres provide varying perspectives on a single topic and can be used to express a message. When writing, authors will choose a genre that effectively conveys their purpose. To compare genres, it is first important to understand what each piece of literature is about and how the purpose of each one compares to the others. “Does Marketing Ethics Really Have Anything to Say? - A Critical Inventory of the Literature” is a scholarly article written to discuss the legitimacy of the term “marketing ethics.” Through research and analysis, Gaski makes the conclusion that ethics do not add to the field of marketing as a whole. Scholarly articles are published with the intent of sharing research and conclusions as a source of information for other professionals, with limited access by the general populace. Although not directly persuasive in nature, it shapes the perspective of those who read it using logical arguments and facts to support conclusions. “Only Ethical Marketing Will Stand the Test of Time,” is an article published on an online forum that discusses what marketing ethics are, common ethical transgressions and how an ethical marketing campaign can be developed. The audience is the same demographic as the website. It is targeted toward people who are business professionals, but can be read and understood by anyone, regardless of their educational background. This article can be categorized as mainstream because of the public forum on which it was published and the diverse audience to whom it is available. The purpose of the article is both informational and persuasive in nature. It informs its audience about what the scope of ethical marketing is and then persuades them to use ethical guidelines in their own marketing campaigns. The persuasive elements are the discussion of why marketing ethics are important, a plan for how to make sure future marketing practices are ethical and a checklist of how to verify a plan is ethical. The author is attempting to influence not only the perspective of the audience, but also their actions.

While both of the previous genres have apparent persuasive intents through their message, not all genres are as transparent. The cartoon, “Note to Self: Never Ask a Parent an Ethics Question When Planning a Career in Advertising,” (see Fig. 1) has four panels that depicts a young girl, seemingly innocently asking her father for clarity around the term “half-truth.” He responds saying that it is a “whole lie,” and she makes a note that in the future she should not look to her parents for advice about ethics, if she wants to pursue a career in advertising. The audience of the cartoon is mainstream, and the purpose is to persuade the audience to call into question the ethics of advertisers. The artist addresses a common stereotype of advertising through satire to convey its message to the audience. The only limiting factors of the audience are access to the cartoon itself, an understanding of modern media, and knowledge of common stereotypes about advertising practices. For readers to comprehend the meaning of the cartoon, they have to know the public perception of advertisers skewing information to manipulate people into buying a product.

Fig. 1 Cartoon about advertising stereotypes

The intended audience of a literary work also influences the sentence structure and word choice of an author. Word choice selection for the mainstream reader plays a key role, as the goal is to keep the audience engaged. Simple sentences and word choice are preferable for these readers. They are not looking for a complex narrative that they have to analyze or think carefully to comprehend. This is contradictory to the style of scholarly articles like Gaski’s. There is a more in-depth and extensive exploration of topics in this genre that translates into complex sentences and sophisticated vocabulary to express ideas. Despite each of the two literary articles being written on a similar topic and addressing what marketing ethics is, they do so in different styles. When Haynes explains the concepts of ethical marketing he writes, “Ethical marketing, simply put, is applying [ethics to the marketing process](https://bookstore.entrepreneur.com/product/the-best-of-guerrilla-marketing-guerrilla-marketing-remix/) -- giving thoughtful examination of particular marketing issues as they relate to moral judgment.” It is a short, simple explanation that most readers will be able to easily comprehend. This is contrary to how Gaski explains the concept. He discusses the origins of the word “ethics” as far back as the “Aristotelian moral philosophy tradition” (315). He chooses a more in-depth description of the idea and underlying meaning of the word before continuing on in his analysis of its applicability to the field of marketing. Word choice is how authors establish a tone and credibility with the audience. Haynes creates a conversational tone to connect with the audience as a peer. Gaski is creating a scientific tone and is establishing himself as an expert in the field. His sophisticated vocabulary shows that he is well-educated he is and that he is a credible source for his audience. When he is explaining his viewpoint that marketing ethics and adhering to the law are the same, he uses the word “coterminous.” While a word commonly used by scholars, it is typically not included within most conversational vocabularies. Miller’s cartoon is on the opposite end of the spectrum from Gaski, while using a simplified vocabulary similar to Haynes. Miller takes it a step further to imply that even children know that advertisers are attempting to manipulate the public. The young girl addresses her father as “daddy,” which is a childish phrase. An author’s word choice impacts how the audience interprets a piece of literature; the tone, the credibility and intentions of the authors are key components of each interpretation. Each genre has its own purpose and thus uses the elements in different ways.

Structure is another way that a genre can be identified, alongside audience, purpose and word choice. Scholarly articles, such as Gaski’s, have similarities and differences to mainstream articles, such as Haynes’. Gaski’s article is longer than most mainstream texts would be; it is 20 pages long. This means that the author had the opportunity to explore a more in-depth analysis than a shorter article allows. Gaski has a clear structural organization, as is typical of a research paper. He starts with an abstract where he clearly states the purpose and conclusions of his research. His writes with common attributes typically found in a scholarly article abstract, by including the overall purpose and research problem, the basic design of the study, and the major findings in under 300 words. Following his abstract, he organizes his article by the order in which he conducted his research. He clearly labels each section starting with his “Method,” moving next to “The hypothesis addressed – inventory of marketing ethics,” “Some empirical corroboration,” “Lingering questions and issues,” and “Reflections and conclusions.” He clearly states his research and how he came to his hypothesis so that others could explore the same topics. Other indicators that this piece is a scholarly article are the presence of tables, exhibits and appendices as proof of research.

The structure of Haynes’ article is a condensed version of how a scholarly text is organized. It has a short introduction with background information on marketing ethics and is divided into sections. The major differences are: fewer sections, shorter sections, and attention catching section headers. Haynes’ article was published on a public forum that requires quickly grabbing the readers’ interest because of the short attention span of readers on the internet. According to Chartbeat CEO Tony Haile, as published in *TIME,* the average person makes the decision to read an article or not read an article in 15 seconds. If the articles were displayed in the same way as the scholarly article, they would not keep the readers’ attention. The layout of the articles is intended to be easily understood and clear, even if the audience merely skims the article instead of reading it. The articles are arranged by what is most important to what is least important, as opposed to chronologically by research methods. The author also uses numbered lists with short explanations to convey information in a form that is easier to read than a block paragraph. The mainstream genre is more focused on readability by the general populace than the scholarly genre.

The structure of a cartoon is fundamentally different from that of either article, mainstream or scholarly. The only writing that exists is conversations between characters, so the structural elements of a written piece of literature are not present. The cartoon has images drawn by an artist and is intended to be understood quickly. In terms of cartoons, it does have individual elements. The minimalist style of the art is unique to the artist. There is not a complicated background to distract from the characters or the message of the cartoon. Structure ranges, in different genres, from the simplicity of a cartoon to the moderate intricacy of mainstream article, all the way to the complexity of a scholarly article.

Every genre, no matter the topic, has unique characteristics. There is no one way that types of literature are required to be written, and the choices of the authors are often guided by others who have preceded them. They make choices about who their audience is, what they want the audience to know, whether they want the audience to take action and what tone they want to establish. There may be overlap in the characteristics of various genres, but it is ultimately a unique combination of elements that make one genre distinct from another.

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