



Advertising Primed: How Professional Identity Affects Moral Reasoning

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Abstract

Moral reasoning among media professionals varies. Historically, advertising professionals score lower on the Defining Issues Test (DIT) than their media colleagues in journalism and public relations. However, the extent to which professional identity impacts media professionals' moral reasoning has yet to be examined. To understand how professional identity influences moral reasoning, if at all, and guided by theories of moral psychology and social identity, 134 advertising practitioners working in the USA participated in an online experiment. While professional identity was not a significant predictor of moral reasoning, an interaction effect between gender and identity priming occurred. This finding suggests that we reconsider moral psychology theory's explanatory power for media practitioners and consider how the complexity of professional identities in concert with gender and professional training, among other variables, interact to affect moral reasoning. In addition, advertising practitioners participating in this experiment scored higher on the DIT than those tested previously.

Keywords Moral reasoning · Moral psychology · Advertising · Identity priming · Experiment

According to recent statistics, 84% of global consumers “seek out responsible products whenever possible” (Sustainable Brands 2015) and 56% of U.S. consumers suggested they would stop buying from companies they believed were unethical (Mintel 2015). In response, marketers and the brands they promote are engaging in brand activism, corporate social responsibility, philanthropy, and other socially responsible marketing practices. Advertising is an essential promotional practice of marketing, but one that has historically been criticized as unethical. Considering

the complexity of producing and placing persuasive content across various platforms with varying degrees of oversight, and involving many players from advertising practitioners and the clients they represent to media producers and publishers, ethical problems abound. As one might expect, when asked, consumers suggest that advertising practitioners are untrustworthy by comparing the profession to that of automobile sales (O’Barr 2006), a perception that increased slightly in 2019 when consumers were asked to rate the honesty and ethical standards of various professional fields including advertising (Gallup 2019).

In media ethics scholarship, findings extend beyond consumer perceptions to suggest how media practitioners apply moral reasoning. When compared to their colleagues in other media fields such as journalism and public relations, advertising practitioners score lower on moral reasoning measures, such as the Defining Issues Test (DIT) (Cunningham 2005), a widely used, valid and reliable measure used in moral psychology (Rest et al. 1999; Xu et al. 2017). The theory of moral psychology, based upon the seminal work of Piaget (1965) and Kohlberg (1981), initially suggested that individuals engage in higher levels of moral reasoning as they age and advance in education (Rest et al. 1977). Since then, ethicists have applied the DIT to assess moral reasoning and to compare reasoning between professions such as

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journalism and advertising, as well as other variables such as age and gender. According to the theory of moral psychology, when responding to ethical scenarios in the DIT and rating the importance of various considerations, advertising professionals should engage in higher levels of moral reasoning than, say, junior high school students. More recently, media ethicists have suggested that experience accounts for higher levels of moral reasoning, perhaps more so than age or education. After examining the workplace of journalists, for example, Wilkins (2010) argued that “the organic human brain includes a hard-wired capacity for moral action influenced by an environment that shapes professional ethical response particularly at the intersection of care and duty” (p. 24). Yet, when last tested, advertising professionals scored only slightly higher than junior high school students in terms of moral reasoning, and even lower when asked to respond to advertising-specific dilemmas (Cunningham 2005).

If advertising practitioners engage in lower levels of moral reasoning in comparison to their media colleagues in journalism and public relations, does this imply that moral reasoning is associated with, and perhaps affected by, one’s profession? While the DIT has, since inception, been used to compare moral reasoning among different variables including professional associations such as advertising, journalism, and public relations, there are few if any studies in media ethics examining the extent to which one’s profession does in fact affect moral reasoning by accounting and controlling for other variables. Indeed, while prior work compares how individuals in various professions score in moral reasoning, this study, through identity priming, seeks a more nuanced understanding. By priming participants with their profession (or not), we are better able to measure whether advertising practitioners apply different levels of moral reasoning when thinking about their profession. For example, while studies suggest that advertising practitioners have lower levels of moral reasoning than journalists, we don’t know if one profession attracts individuals with lower versus higher levels of moral reasoning or if working in each profession negatively and positively impacts their moral reasoning. Furthermore, moral reasoning scores have only been reported once for advertising practitioners (Cunningham 2005). Therefore, from the perspective of social identity theory and through experimentation, this study is the first to answer, to what extent does one’s professional identity impact an advertising practitioner’s moral reasoning?

Social identity theory helps to explain the extent to which professional socialization impacts a person’s identity and potentially his or her moral capacity. Social identity theory purports that identities are formed based upon one’s formal and informal membership in various groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979), including professional groups (Hackley and Kover 2007). Priming allows researchers to access aspects of identity through exposure to a stimulus that activates the

most accessible information one holds about his or her identity. To measure the effects of one’s membership in various groups, the method of identity priming suggests that through experimental methodology, researchers can raise the salience of one’s professional identity by priming, which allows us to understand the effects of professional identity on other attributes, such as moral reasoning (Cohn et al. 2014).

Therefore, the current study examines the extent to which professional identity impacts an advertising practitioner’s level of moral reasoning. Industry practices are changing, which suggests that the moral reasoning of advertising practitioners might be as well. As the industry continues to evolve, it is important to understand the extent to which it impacts practitioners’ moral reasoning therein. And while the changes to the industry make this a fascinating time to study advertising ethics, there is also a need for an update. The last, and only, study to measure advertising practitioners’ moral reasoning by Cunningham was published in Wilkins and Coleman’s (2005a) book, *The Moral Media*. In addition, scholarship has yet to examine the extent to which moral reasoning among advertising practitioners can be attributed to the profession, and therefore, to one’s professional identity. To understand how professional identity influences moral reasoning and guided by theories of moral psychology and social identity, 134 advertising practitioners working in the United States participated in an online experiment that utilized priming.

Advertising Ethics and Moral Reasoning

Research on advertising ethics has largely bifurcated into two main channels: one examining consumers’ perceptions of advertising content and the other examining practitioners’ views of advertising content and professional practices (e.g., Cunningham 2005; Drumwright and Murphy 2009; Hunt and Chonko 1987; Schauster 2015; Schauster et al. 2016; Schauster and Neill 2017). Within both channels, the focus is often on how problems faced are perceived either by the consumer or the practitioner as having ethical implications. For example, previous studies have suggested that the profession faces opportunities to engage in unethical acts, in response to changes influenced by emerging media (Drumwright and Murphy 2009) such as misleading audiences with unidentifiable content (e.g., native advertising), especially when these practices result in effective advertising (Schauster and Neill 2017). Practitioners have suggested that, while the same types of problems persist, due to emerging media there are more opportunities to act unethically (Drumwright and Murphy 2009).

Regarding practitioners’ views of ethics, which is the focus of the current study, Drumwright and Murphy (2004) were two of the few scholars to study the relationship of the

advertising profession, via organizational culture, on ethical decision-making. The authors found that advertising practitioners demonstrated moral muteness (rarely talking about ethical issues) and moral myopia (difficulty seeing the presence of ethical issues or seeing them clearly). However, the authors found some exceptions to this finding, including practitioners who recognized and talked about ethical issues. These practitioners, who demonstrated what the authors referred to as moral imagination, tended to work for agencies that fostered moral seeing and talking. In other words, the organizational culture of the agency was reflected by the individuals' moral imagination (Drumwright and Murphy 2004). Similarly, in a study of the relationship between organizational culture and advertising ethics, Schauster (2015) found a divided view of culture, and therefore a divided view of ethics, where moral myopia and ethical awareness concurrently existed. The author concluded that ethical awareness within an organization is best represented as a continuum and that organizational members can display awareness from varying degrees such as myopia to acute awareness supplemented with virtuous character. The significance of these works was the attention afforded to the role of organizational culture on ethical decision-making. Advertising ethics research on practitioner perceptions of organizational culture provides contextual details for understanding the ethical problems practitioners face and the actions taken to respond to these problems.

Beyond the two main streams of advertising ethics research, there have recently been examinations of advertising practitioners' moral reasoning as one small fraction of a larger body of work in media ethics and moral psychology. These studies reflect a theoretical and epistemological shift in media ethics scholarship. This shift, one that Plaisance (2016) describes as paradigmatic, is one moving toward a post-positivist approach to media ethics research, which utilizes moral psychology theory. Moral psychology theory suggests that as we age, engage in social encounters, and participate in formal education, our moral reasoning advances. Since 1974, moral reasoning has been measured by the defining issues test (DIT), a developmental measure of moral comprehension and preference (Rest et al. 1977). Since then, the DIT has been used to measure moral reasoning of various groups of people including media students (e.g., Auger and Gee 2016; Cabot 2005), media practitioners (e.g., Lieber 2008; Plaisance 2015; Wilkins and Coleman 2005a), business managers in general (e.g., Elm and Nichols 1993; Wimalasiri et al. 1996), and advertising executives specifically (e.g. Castleberry et al. 1993; Cunningham 2005; Gale and Bunton 2005).

The DIT works by "activating moral schemas (to the extent the person has developed them) and for assessing them in terms of importance judgments" (Rest et al. 1999, p. 6). These activated schemas were identified by Kohlberg

(1981) as three distinct levels: the pre-conventional (defined by obedience to acknowledged rules and the avoidance of punishment), conventional (when right action is defined by that which "instrumentally satisfies one's needs and occasionally the needs of others"), and post-conventional (moral values exist beyond social or personal influence) (p. 17). According to Rest (1979), in the pre-conventional level, individuals adhere to obedience and doing what they're told (stage one) followed by instrumental egoism and making deals with others (stage two). The conventional level is comprised of stages three and four. In stage three, individuals engage in interpersonal concordance and acts of kindness to get along with others. In stage four, one begins to acknowledge social order and one's obligation to follow and protect the law. In the final, post-conventional level, individuals adhere to societal consensus (stage five) where agreements are made by due process procedures, and to social cooperation (stage six), which defines morality as "how rational and impartial people would organize cooperation" (Rest 1979, p. 24).

The DIT has produced varying results based upon what is known as the *P*-score (not to be confused with statistical significance reported as *p* value), which reflects the extent to which an individual applies post-conventional thinking to moral dilemmas. Ranging from zero to 95,¹ higher *P*-scores are associated with higher levels of moral reasoning and can vary based upon gender, education, and profession. In media ethics education research and the study of college students specifically, for example, Cabot (2005) found no significant differences between gender, while Auger and Gee (2016) found significant differences between genders; men's mean score of 29.76 was statistically different than women's mean score of 39.69.

The varying results of moral reasoning also have been reported relative to one's profession, years of experience, and moral commitment. In media ethics scholarship, DIT scores suggest that journalists and public relations practitioners engage in higher levels of moral reasoning (e.g., Coleman and Wilkins 2002; Coleman and Wilkins 2009; Lee et al. 2016; Plaisance 2014; Wilkins and Coleman 2005b) than advertising practitioners (Cunningham 2005). For example, Coleman and Wilkins (2002) found that of all professions studied, journalists scored the fourth highest on the DIT, with a *P*-score of 48.17, falling only behind seminarians/philosophers (65.1), medical students (50.2), and practicing physicians (49.2). Scores increase relative to certain personality traits, such as those possessed by

¹ The DIT score, called a *P*-score, is calculated as a percentage but ranges from 0 to 95 since three of the stories included do not offer a fourth possible principled item to choose. More information regarding how the DIT is scored is in the method section.

moral exemplars. A moral exemplar is someone who sets an example for others and is characterized by moral commitment, personal integrity, standards of honesty, and selfless goals (Colby and Damon 1992). Plaisance (2014, 2015) studied moral exemplars in journalism and public relations with several years to decades of professional experience. As predicted, their moral reasoning scores were higher than averages previously reported for non-exemplars, whereas journalism exemplars scored 51.62 on the DIT and public relations exemplars scored 50.38.

Education has historically been the most consistent predictor of moral development (DIT Manual 1986). Castleberry et al. (1993) found that advertising and marketing research professionals scored² higher than the general population, which the authors suggested might be attributable to the researchers' higher levels of education, holding at least a master's degree on average. However, findings suggest that advertising practitioners score lower than other media professionals, and even lower when asked to reflect upon advertising-specific practices. Moral reasoning decreased from a *P*-score of 31.64 to 22.7 when advertising practitioners were prompted with advertising-specific versus general dilemmas (Cunningham 2005). Cunningham concluded that while advertising practitioners can and do engage in higher stages of moral reasoning, as predicted due to their education levels, they suspend moral judgment when asked to respond to ethical dilemmas specific to advertising. Further evidence that education might not be the best predictor of moral development is a study of journalists with an average of four years of college education who scored better on moral reasoning than dental, veterinary, and graduate students who have about one to two more years of education (Coleman and Wilkins 2002). These findings cause speculation regarding the impact professional identity might have on moral reasoning.

Furthermore, these discrepancies, while frustrating to some, are invaluable to advancing media ethics research by broaching the importance that influences such as professional identity have on moral reasoning. As previously noted, in earlier DIT studies, moral development was positively correlated with both age and education (Rest et al. 1977), but it was later suggested that formal education and experience are more predictive of moral reasoning due to the "cumulative impact" that "stimulating social experiences" have on development (Rest et al. 1999, p. 125). Furthermore, organizational context can impact the moral reasoning or

practitioners (e.g., Elm and Nichols 1993), including media practitioners. Lieber (2008) studied public relations practitioners (*P*-score 45.41), and found no differences for age, gender and education, but did find significant differences in moral development based on job setting, with solo practitioners (52.2) and academics (49.3) scoring highest, and agency and corporate practitioners scoring lowest (39.8). The environment of advertising professionals had a negative impact. In addition to advertising-specific dilemmas negatively impacting moral reasoning, Cunningham (2005) found that moral reasoning decreased for practitioners the longer they worked in the advertising industry. Some professions might have a negative impact on moral reasoning, while others a positive impact, yet there are currently few findings to support this suggestion.

Several organizational variables might be at play relative to the impact one's profession has on moral reasoning. For example, despite the financial and therefore ethical pressures they face, Salana et al. (2016) found that newspaper editors could simultaneously reason from ethical and managerial perspectives. The ethical perspectives professionals have are often reflective of organizational culture and organizational climate. Wilkins (2010) orients these organizational factors to the context-dependent assumptions of Bandura, Kohlberg, and Piaget. For example, Piaget (1965) suggested that a child is influenced by rules and regulations that permeate his or her environment; some things are allowed and others are not. According to Kohlberg, cognitive development is the "result of *interaction* between structure of the organism, and the structure of the environment, rather than being the direct result of maturation or the direct result of learning (in the sense of a direct shaping of the organism's responses to accord with environmental structures)" (1969, p. 348; emphasis in original). Building upon these assumptions, if an organizational environment can impact one's moral reasoning, the profession of advertising should be no exception. To understand this relationship, and explore the discrepancies in moral reasoning scores, we must first review social identity theory, specifically the social and professional identity of advertising practitioners.

Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory

Fundamentally, people form their personal identities through formal or informal membership in various social groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Membership in these social groups comes, primarily, through social categorization determined by the presence or non-presence of any number of characteristics (Gardikiotis 2008). Social identity theory argues that people aspire to membership in groups consisting of

² DIT scores can be calculated and reported as *P*-scores and *D*-scores, which is the score used by Castleberry, French and Carlin (1993). *D* scores are averaged into thirds, 0–16, 17–25, > 26, with a national media of 20, according to the authors. The results with advertising and marketing professionals found 58% fell in the 17–25 category and 41% in the > 26 category.

like-minded others and these memberships shape identity (Turner 1982), and that people want to be thought of positively by others (Tajfel 1982). Essentially, these groups could be formal organizations such as the National Rifle Association or a local teachers' union, but they can also be informal groups based around characteristics such as gender, religion, race or sports fandom (Brewer 1979).

One main concept at the core of social identity theory revolves around the existence of both in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979). For example, if a person considers him/herself a loyalist to a favorite brand, say Nike, they would consider other like-minded consumers as part of an in-group; people who do not consider themselves Nike brand loyalists or people who do not fall into this hypothetical person's strict definition would be part of the out-group. Because people define themselves through memberships in various in-groups (Hogg et al. 1995), they tend to view others in the in-group positively, and, within these groups, behaviors can become socialized (Tajfel and Turner 1979). For example, research showed that as digital journalists began conceptualizing their identities differently than traditional journalists, their behaviors became more consistent across organizations (Ferrucci and Vos 2017). In summary, essential characteristics of social identity theory are the need to be viewed positively by others and possessing a positive view of the in-groups of which a person considers themselves a member (Tajfel 1982).

Advertising Identity and Ethics

The average person considers oneself a member of several social groups at any moment (Linville and Fischer 1993). Occupation, or professional identity, is a large part of many peoples' identities including advertising professionals, whose identities are continually negotiated and impacted by the creative and managerial practices of the profession (Hackley and Kover 2007). In fact, within creative industries such as advertising, oftentimes professional identity is so engrained in the work that they sometimes suffer from "social splitting" (Nixon and Crewe 2004, p. 143). For advertising practitioners, that means having to navigate identities focused on creative associations (Round and Styhre 2017). Fundamentally, employment within any creative industry, and particularly within advertising, affects people in such a way that even if they do not actually do creative work, the essence of their creative organization becomes a central part of the person's overall identity (West 1993). And this occupational identity of advertising professionals appears to remain relatively static and strong (Round and Styhre 2017) even amidst an influx of new technologies and shifting business practices in the advertising industry (e.g., Sheehan 2013; Wong et al. 2015). However, the extent

to which this identity has an effect on moral reasoning is unknown.

There are several ethical implications of advertising as a creative industry. For example, creative work is characterized by uncertainty (Round and Styhre 2017). Furthermore, tensions exist between creatives and others serving in management or administrative roles (de Gregorio et al. 2012; Round and Styhre 2017). While both creative and business tasks constitute the advertising function, advertising's success is often predicated on the work of the creative team. A creative professional is one involved in creative work, with formal credentials such as a university degree and associated accomplishments such as awards (Collins and Evans 2007), contributing to the professionalism of the field. A recent study found that creatives were deemed the "stars" of the advertising agency, which differentiated them from others in the organization (Round and Styhre 2017). This division can lead to conflict and a "power struggle as individuals and groups seek to maintain dominance of the 'other'" (Round and Styhre 2017, p. 9). In addition, advertising is often mediated with intentions to achieve high levels of reach and frequency, giving the work mass exposure and consequently reaching unintended, and at times vulnerable, audiences. All things combined, one can see how ethical problems might emerge. However, little is known as to whether or not advertising practitioners identify with a morally problematic profession, as well as whether or not this identity impacts ethical behavior.

Identity Priming

When researchers aim to understand how one behaves when a certain portion of the individual's personal identity is activated, identity priming is a valid tool (Cohn et al. 2014). This technique allows researchers to assess how strongly a person's self-categorization into a specific group affects one's decision-making. For example, researchers wanted to understand how religious affiliation could affect people's willingness to donate to charities for underprivileged people (Benjamin et al. 2010). The researchers split participants into two groups. In the experiment, one group was primed with their religious identity—for example, Catholics were repeatedly reminded they were Catholic—and then asked about how much they would donate. The other group answered the same questions but did not receive the prime. The researchers fundamentally wanted to activate the portion of the participants' identity associated with membership in a religion. The study found that, when primed with religious identity, Protestant participants were more likely to donate to charities, while Catholics were less likely. In a more recent example, Cohn et al. (2014) wanted to understand if riskiness was part of Wall Street executives' professional identity. The researchers primed one group of Wall

Street executives with their professional identity by asking a series of innocuous questions prefaced with a phrase such as, “As a Wall Street executive ...” The repeated use of that phrase and other similar ones made the participants’ professional identity more top of mind, more salient. After answering those questions, executives answered another set of questions measuring their willingness to take risks. In this experiment, the authors found that while Wall Street executives might be riskier than the public, the group primed with their professional identity were actually less likely to take risks, meaning that riskiness might not be a part of a Wall Street executives’ professional identity.

Identity priming is utilized in a very similar manner to priming theory, which suggests that when presented with a stimulus, people use the most accessible information in their cognitive networks to make sense of the new material (Goidel et al. 1997). Priming permits researchers to study what information becomes easily retrievable in a person’s cognitive network when primed with a characteristic, so it is often used to test both how participants behave with the prime and without the prime (Abraham and Appiah 2006).

As previously stated, moral reasoning scores of media professionals vary based upon gender and education. However, there’s little known regarding education beyond college such as on-the-job and ethics training. In addition, while previous scores vary by profession, and findings suggest that advertising professionals have lower levels of moral reasoning than journalists and public relations practitioners, there’s little known regarding the extent to which one’s professional identity impacts moral reasoning. Therefore, guided by the frameworks of social identity theory, identity priming, moral psychology, and previous DIT results, this study tested and responds to the following hypotheses and research questions:

H1 Based on previous studies, (a) age and (b) education will be positively related to level of moral development.

RQ1 Are there significant differences between subgroups of advertising professionals, specifically based on (a) gender, (b) number of years in the industry, (c) involvement in professional training, and (d) involvement in ethics training?

H2 Based upon previous DIT results, advertising professionals who are primed with their professional identity will score lower in moral development than those who are not primed.

RQ2 Is there a significant difference between advertising professionals’ DIT results in 2017 compared to those tested in 2005?

Method

The study was an online experiment with 134 advertising practitioners currently working in the United States. The sample was compiled from Red Books Academic Edition, the online directory of advertising agencies and advertisers, by filtering for U.S. agencies, and personnel profiles therein, and excluding job functions of human resources, business development and sales. To generate a random³ sample of executives from the database, every 10th entry was copied (name and email address) resulting in a list of 7541 names. The experiment was emailed to 6888 working addresses and three email reminders were sent resulting in 451 responses and 171 completed responses. Excluding those who indicated they had no experience working in advertising, the study was left with 145 respondents, of which 57% were male, 66% completed a college degree, and the average age was 45.44 years (SD = 11.61).⁴ (See Table 1).

In the online experiment, each participant was randomly assigned to a primed or not primed condition determined by each participant’s birth month. In both conditions, participants read questions seemingly unrelated to their profession such as “Do you use Twitter.” However, in the primed conditions, all innocuous questions were prefaced with the clause, “As an advertising executive, ...” This study design is based on the one employed by Cohn et al. (2014), which is the first to test the effects of occupational identity through identity priming. Like that study, this design relies on the repeated use of the phrase, “As an advertising executive” to prime participants in the primed condition to answer the DIT with their professional identity salient in their cognitive network.

This experiment utilized a similar design as other DIT experiments conducted between subjects (Frecknall-Hughes et al. 2017) and the same design as identity priming studies, including ones that found a priming effect (Cohn et al. 2014; Round and Styhre 2017). In addition, the current study is part of a larger study that independently tested the effects identity priming has on moral reasoning for each of three media professions, the first of which utilized a manipulation

³ According to their website (<https://www.redbooks.com/why-redbooks/>), Redbooks lists more than 255,000 industry personnel with detailed contact information and more than 10,000 U.S. and international agency profiles. While randomization within the database was intended, Red Books is an online database that’s updated daily, influencing name placement, therefore a true random sample cannot be generated.

⁴ Both the current and previous study utilized a convenience sample. However, Cunningham (2005) recruited using snowball sampling of industry contacts. In the 2005 study, the mean age was 39 years, 52.4% were female, 90% had college degrees. More than half (54%) worked in advertising for 10 years or less and 25.4% worked in advertising more than 20 years. Agencies ranged in size from small (three persons) to large, international agencies.

Table 1 Demographic information

	Current sample	2005 sample
Age	45.44 years (SD = 11.61)	39 years
Gender	56.9% males	47.6% males
Education	66.4% with bachelor's degree	90% college degrees
Years in advertising	19.29 years (SD = 11.39)	54% 10 years or less 25.4% 20 years or more

check to test the priming effect. In the first of these studies, primed journalists were asked to assess the newsworthiness of articles based on five items: importance, impact, relevance, ought to be published, and whether readers would care about the story (*Cronbach's alpha* = 0.87). The manipulation worked in the intended direction, $F(1, 172) = 7.95$, $p < 0.01$, *partial eta squared* = 0.04. Journalists who were primed ($M = 4.07$, $SE = 0.07$) were more critical in their ratings of newsworthiness than were those who were not primed ($M = 4.34$, $SE = 0.07$).⁵

The DIT utilizes a standardized format and objective scoring resulting in a *P*-score, which is used to compare moral development across professions, among other categories such as age and education (Rest et al. 1977). The *P*-score calculation can also be compared across DIT formats, including online and paper format, short and long form.⁶ The *P*-score suggests the importance each person gives to “principled considerations” (Coleman and Wilkins 2004, p. 515), which reflects the third level (post-conventional) and final two stages of the six stages of moral reasoning identified by Kohlberg (1981). When taking the DIT, a subject reads each dilemma and then 12 statements following each dilemma. The statements are rated on a scale of great importance to no importance, and the top four most important considerations of the 12 are then ranked. To account for the random selection of stages, or selection based upon the style and complexity of statements, the DIT incorporates meaningless statements, in which case questionnaires are thrown out. In the current study, due to meaningless rankings, 11 were thrown out resulting in 134 questionnaires.

Since its inception, the DIT has been condensed from a six- to a five- as well as a three-scenario measure (i.e., the “short form”) and is offered online as well as in its original paper form.⁷ Aside from these logistical revisions, the DIT has remained unchanged to establish validity and generality (Rest et al. 1999). When comparing the differences of

administering the DIT in person or online, both versions were found reliable (Xu et al. 2017).⁸ In general, the measure has been applied to cross-sectional design, large composite samples, and different subsamples for each age and education grouping resulting in the “mega sample” of 45,856 DIT scores (Rest et al. 1999, p. 64). In media studies, the DIT is often administered to small convenience samples (Coleman and Wilkins 2002) of journalists, advertising practitioners, and public relations practitioners, which allows for comparisons within and across industries.

Aside from accounting for demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, education, number of years in the advertising industry), this study also asked respondents to indicate their involvement in professional training as well as in ethics training. First, the participants were asked, “About how many professional workshops or training sessions on advertising do you attend in a year?” They were instructed to select one of the following options: less than one, one, between two and six, between seven and 11, 12 or more. Using the same set of options, the participants were also asked, “About how many workshops or training sessions on ethics do you attend in a year?”

Findings

A regression analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions posed in this study. This allows us to test the impact of our independent variables (e.g., age, gender, education, years in the industry, professional training, ethics training) on moral development, which is measured in this study as the *P*-Score. The regression model was significant, $F(8, 134) = 2.03$, $p < 0.05$, explaining about 6% of the variance in the *P*-Score.

H1 predicted that based on previous studies, a) age and b) education will be positively related to level of moral development as measured by the *P*-score. The regression analysis found that neither age ($\beta = 0.28$, $t = 1.51$, $p > 0.05$)

⁵ Ferrucci et al. (2019). *Journalism Practice*.

⁶ The DIT is administered as a six-dilemma questionnaire (DIT-1), a five-dilemma questionnaire (DIT-2) or as a “short form” of either the DIT-1 or DIT-2, which includes three dilemmas.

⁷ The DIT is copyrighted. For more information about how the DIT works and gaining permission to use the measure, visit <https://ethicaldevelopment.ua.edu/about-the-dit.html>.

⁸ The author of the cited 2017 study, Stephen Thoma, is the Emeritus Executive Director of the Center for the Study of Ethical Development, which owns the copyright to the DIT.

Fig. 1 Interaction effect between identity priming and gender. *Note* The analysis showed an interaction effect between gender and priming, $F(1, 134)=3.20, p<.05, \text{partial eta squared}=.02$

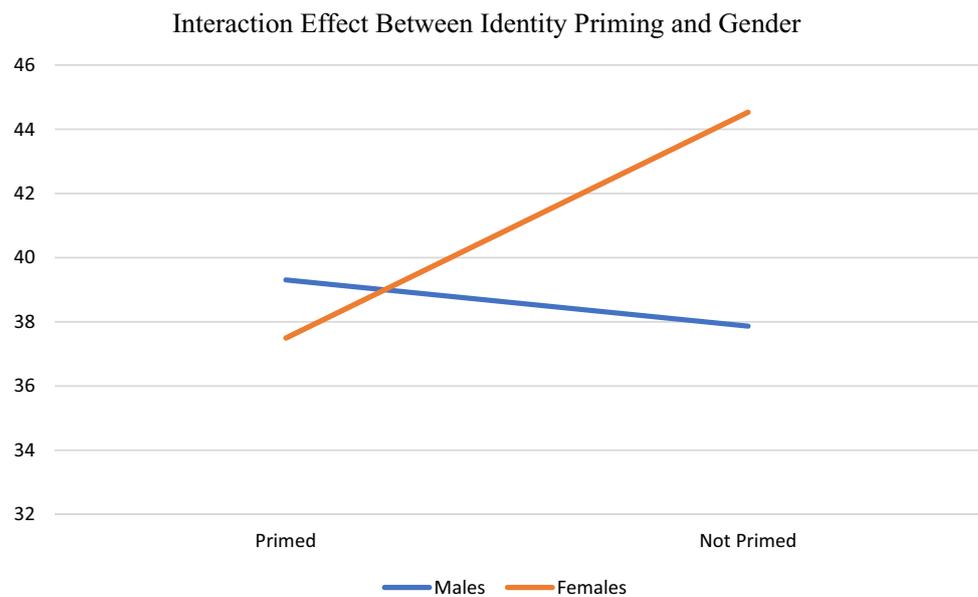


Table 2 Regression analysis

	β	t	p
Age	0.28	1.51	0.134
Gender	-0.36	-1.33	0.186
Education	0.07	0.82	0.414
Years in Advertising	-0.39	-2.04	0.043
Professional training	0.12	1.42	0.157
Ethics training	0.10	1.18	0.241
Condition	-0.35	-1.38	0.169
Interaction between condition and gender	0.63	1.79	0.076

The regression model was significant, $F(8, 134)=2.03, p<.05$, explaining about 6% of the variance in the P -Score

nor education ($\beta=0.07, t=0.89, p>0.05$) were significant predictors of the P -Score. Therefore, H1 was not supported.

RQ1 asked about the impact of (a) gender, (b) number of years in the industry, (c) involvement in professional training, and (d) involvement in ethics training on level of moral development. The analysis found that gender has no significant impact, ($\beta=-0.36, t=-1.33, p>0.05$). Involvement in professional training ($\beta=0.12, t=1.42, p>0.05$) and involvement in ethics training ($\beta=0.10, t=1.18, p>0.05$) were also not significant predictors. However, the analysis found that years in advertising profession was a significant and negative predictor, ($\beta=-0.39, t=-2.04, p<0.05$), such that the longer the respondents have been in the advertising profession, the lower they score on the DIT.

H2 predicted that the participants primed with their professional identity as advertising professionals will score lower in moral development than those who were not primed.

However, the analysis also showed that identity priming was not a significant predictor, ($\beta=-0.35, t=-1.38, p>0.05$). A confirmatory test, using analysis of covariance to compare the primed and not primed groups while controlling for the other variables, confirmed this result, $F(1, 134)=1.35, p>0.05$. While those in the primed condition ($M=38.40, SD=1.77$) had a slightly lower average P -score than those in the not primed condition ($M=41.20, SD=1.58$), the difference was not statistically significant.

While we originally did not set out to test it, the analysis also showed an interaction effect between gender and priming, $F(1, 134)=3.20, p<0.05, \text{partial eta squared}=0.02$. In the primed condition, males ($M=39.31, SE=2.42$) scored slightly higher than females ($M=37.50, SD=2.58$). However, in the not primed condition, males ($M=37.87, SD=1.99$) scored much lower than females ($M=44.53, SD=2.47$). The regression analysis confirmed this, as the effect of the interaction term was found to be approaching the threshold of significance, ($\beta=0.63, t=1.79, p=0.076$). See Table 2.

Finally, RQ2 asked whether there is a significant difference between advertising professionals in 2017 compared with those tested in 2005.⁹ A one-sample t-test showed a significant difference, $t(146)=6.52, p<0.01$. This current study's participants ($M=39.27, SD=14.12$) scored

⁹ The 2005 study utilized an online version of the DIT. Participants were recruited through snowballing of industry contacts and 65 surveys were collected. The mean age of participants was 39, 52.4% were female, 90% had college degrees, and 23.6% had graduate degrees. More than half (54%) worked in advertising for 10 years or less and 25.4% worked in advertising for more than 20 years.

significantly higher than ones tested for the 2005 study ($M = 31.64$, $SD = 12.1$). See Fig. 1.

Discussion

Advertising professionals' moral reasoning scores, as measured by the DIT in the current study, are higher than scores last reported in 2005. The higher the score, the more often practitioners engage in post-conventional moral reasoning, reflective of social cooperation. While this experiment cannot be generalized to the advertising industry overall, the finding is encouragement for an industry fraught with ethical dilemmas, and one previously viewed as untrustworthy. In the current study, advertising practitioners averaged a P -score of 39.27, which is significantly higher than those tested in 2005 with a P -score of 31.64. Based upon her previous findings, Cunningham (2005) suggested that when required to engage in ethical decision-making, advertising practitioners suspended moral reasoning to focus on other implications of their work, such as financial factors impacting their and their client's success. Are practitioners today reorienting their focus on the ethical implications of their practices? What we could be witnessing, and future testing might explore, is the simultaneous rise of consumer-driven, socially responsible practices alongside increased levels of moral reasoning among practitioners resulting in a more ethical, mutually respectful marketplace.

However, our findings suggest involvement in the profession, represented by professional identity, negatively impacts moral reasoning. We predicted that when primed with professional identity, advertising professionals would score lower in moral development than those who were not primed. In response to H2, we found that when primed advertising practitioners' moral reasoning scores went down (38.40) versus when not primed (41.20). Although not a significant predictor, the absolute numbers suggest a difference in levels of moral reasoning when professional identity is activated. When comparing moral reasoning utilizing DIT studies, raw scores are used versus significance tests; therefore, when viewed through that prism, a score of almost three points lower matters.

In addition, the current study found that years worked in advertising was a significant and negative predictor of moral reasoning. This meant that those who have been in the profession for a longer time tend to display lower levels of moral development than those who just joined the industry. While advertising practitioners in the current study aren't suspending moral reasoning due to the various factors impacting ethical decision-making in advertising, as Cunningham (2005) found, they are suspending moral reasoning the longer they're exposed to these factors. Instead of moral development, our findings suggest that moral regression is

occurring. A plausible explanation is the socialization that occurs when professionals join the industry. New entrants might carry with them the ideals and optimism they have learned and developed from their university education, which often includes courses in ethics, and internship training, but as they spend more years in the profession, they get exposed to the realities and dilemmas that advertising professionals must navigate on a day-to-day basis.

The longer an individual works in advertising, the longer they're exposed to unethical opportunities. According to two studies, advertising practitioners are impacted by greater opportunities to behave unethically, due in large degree by emerging digital media practices (Schauster and Neill 2017) and, therefore, are tempted to engage in unethical acts (Drumwright and Murphy 2009). While temptations abound, according to interviews with advertising and public relations executives, there's no guarantee that advertising practitioners receive ethics training to better respond to challenges such as misleading native advertising, misleading disclosure of paid and earned media, and digital ad fraud, to name a few. Instead of receiving ethics training, they are expected to know, and act in accordance with, the regulations that exist; however, these executives suggested that practitioners need formal training to understand government regulations and to heighten ethical awareness (Schauster and Neill 2017). Furthermore, moral psychology theory states that professional experience, more so than age and education, impacts moral reasoning (Kohlberg 1969; Lieber 2008; Rest et al. 1999; Wilkins 2010). According to our results, and in response to H1, neither age nor education had a significant relationship with moral reasoning. However, in response to RQ1, neither involvement in professional training nor ethics training impacted moral reasoning either. Therefore, while we expected to find a significant relationship between all three covariates, moral reasoning unaffected by involvement in professional training is most upsetting. In addition to lacking professional training, as previous findings have suggested, we speculate that advertising practitioners who do receive professional training simply aren't receiving *influential* training that fosters ethical awareness and an ethical environment.

We suggest two practical implications of these results. These findings, in concordance with the theoretical premise that professional experience impacts moral reasoning, are yet another nudge to the industry to revisit and revamp ethics training for advertising professionals. The current climate of brand activism and social responsibility in advertising might foster the most opportune time for an ethics training initiative when ethical practices are most relevant and abundant. In addition, the advertising industry can harness the moral ideals and optimism of their young professionals. If new entrants are more likely to apply moral awareness and respond to ethical challenges with higher levels of

moral reasoning than their senior colleagues, they should be invited to the decision-making table.

Finally, our findings uncovered an interaction effect. While gender alone had no significant impact on moral reasoning, there was an interaction effect between gender and priming. Males not primed with professional identity scored much lower (37.87) than females (44.53), and when primed, males scored slightly higher (39.31) than females (37.50) on moral reasoning. These findings are further indication that professional experience in advertising could impact moral reasoning in two ways. First, in this study, women scored higher when not primed. Higher moral reasoning scores for women aligns with previous findings (Auger and Gee 2016). While in general, women engage in higher levels of moral reasoning than men, women's reasoning in the current study was suspended when asked to think like an advertising professional. Women, more so than men, are compromising their ethical values when they operate as advertising professionals. We think socialization is at play here as well, but the impact is situational versus developmental. As a situational measure, moral reasoning is influenced by contextual characteristics of the professional's work environment, versus solely developmental, which suggests that moral reasoning increases based upon predetermined characteristics such as age. New entrants are socialized into the realities of advertising, and their moral reasoning is negatively impacted over time, even as they age. In advertising, women retain higher levels of moral reasoning but suspend ethical considerations to, perhaps, more effectively respond to these realities.

The other impact occurs in the opposite direction we'd expect relative to previous DIT findings. Based upon previous results, we predicted that when primed, moral reasoning scores would decrease, because in general men's scores are lower. The interaction effect suggests the opposite for males. When males are primed, they have higher levels of moral reasoning than primed females. As the first study to test professional identity with an experiment, we believe this suggests that professional experience does impact men's moral reasoning more than women's reasoning. So, what's so different about the professional experiences of men versus women? The executive-level positions they occupy. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018), women comprise 47.5% of those employed by advertising, public relations, and related services, which doesn't specifically identify those in leadership roles. According to a Forbes article, executive-level positions in advertising are now about equally distributed between men and women, which historically hasn't been the case; however, men still outnumber women as creative directors (Dan 2016). However, this claim isn't statistically supported. Instead, the author supports the claim with anecdotal evidence by stating that he's served as an "agency search consultant" that "sit[s] through many pitches and visit[s] many agencies." Comparatively, another

report suggests that 25% of executive leaders in marketing and media agencies are women, and drops even lower as they approach the C-suite (She Runs It 2017), which aligns with occurrences in UK advertising agencies (Magee 2016) and U.S. public relations agencies (Risi 2016).

Leadership positions in general, incorporate aspects of (if not entirely subsume) management responsibilities, which would likely incorporate formal and informal training. While overall, professional training had no significant impact on moral reasoning, the interaction effect suggests that professionalism, exemplified through executive-level positions, might play a role. In addition, these findings lead us to question if males, serving in leadership, management, and executive positions, denote some degree of exemplary moral behavior? Future research on moral exemplars, to extend the work of Plaisance (2014, 2015), is warranted to better understand the psychological traits, professional experiences, training, and moral reasoning of leaders in advertising.

Perhaps most importantly, these findings suggest we reevaluate moral psychology for its effectiveness in explaining moral reasoning overall and for media practitioners specifically. Piaget (1965) and Kohlberg (1981) studied the moral development of childhood and adolescent boys and determined that as they age they apply higher levels of moral reasoning to decision-making in social contexts such as game play. Media ethicists have applied the theory of moral reasoning to understand the development of media students and practitioners and found that college-aged and older adults working professionally continue to develop morally, which is reflective of age and education, but with varying results. The inconsistency of moral reasoning due to age, education, and gender necessitated the consideration of professional experience as another variable of influence, but to no avail: journalists score highest, followed by public relations then advertising practitioners, and today we find these levels are shifting for advertising practitioners. Why would this be so, when media practitioners across industries are aging and earning similar college degrees? We believe the answer lies in the complexities of life and the changing technological and competitive realities of doing business in this conglomerated, globalized marketplace.

These findings, and in consideration of previous studies, suggest that moral psychology doesn't consider the complexities of adult life, nuanced with social, professional, political, and cultural identities, etc., which are situated in economic, cultural, and political contexts, etc. We simply looked at professional identity and the interaction effect supports the notion that moral development works differently for adults. Moral development is not an upward trajectory for adults, but more closely resembles an "if(and)" equation, e.g., if male, and receiving professional training by way of an executive role, then they'll engage in higher levels of moral reasoning. Moral reasoning is complex and nuanced,

because development is contextually situated and influenced by any number of variables at a given point in time, which impacts one's reasoning as well as one's future development. Further examinations of interaction effects could extend our understanding of just how complex moral reasoning really is.

Limitations, Future Research and Conclusion

While insightful in more ways than one, there are limitations of these results, which have implications for future research. First, participants did not proportionately occupy the various roles of advertising. Specifically, we had hoped to test the moral reasoning of creatives (e.g., copywriters and art directors) versus account executives and strategists but had too few participants that identified as creatives. Second, an experiment doesn't allow for generalizability. Therefore, a future study could survey a larger, representative sample, so that results are more generalizable across the industry. Regarding the nuanced complexity of the various roles within the industry, special attention should be afforded to recruiting so that various departments are represented, such as creative, account management, and media planning departments, to better understand how moral reasoning might vary between specific job roles. In addition, it's been over a decade since advertising professionals' moral reasoning was tested. While our results may be measuring a change in *P*-scores over time, they also may be measuring generational differences, which future research could test over time with planned intervals of study.

In conclusion, an increased level of moral reasoning found among advertising practitioners is good news for the industry. Beyond this encouragement, this study provides an update on the work published in 2005, extending our knowledge of professional influences on moral reasoning in advertising specifically, and media ethics in general. We now better comprehend just how complex moral reasoning among professional adults is, and we can continue to promote the importance of professional training while enhancing moral psychology theory in media ethics scholarship.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee of the University of Colorado Institutional Review Board for protocol 16–0590 and with the 1964

Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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