

Certified Ethical Advertising Executive: An Online Tool for Teaching Advertising Ethics

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Abstract

This study examines the value of a new certification program designed to teach nine principles of ethical advertising. The Certified Ethical Advertising Executive (CEAE) certificate course was added to the curriculum in two undergraduate marketing courses in Fall of 2023. The same courses were taught by the same instructors in the semester prior (Spring 2023). The only substantive difference between the two semesters was that students in the Fall semester were required to complete the CEAE course as a course assignment. An online survey was used to measure students' attitudes toward advertising ethics at the end of each semester. Results showed significant shifts on 9 of 12 survey metrics. The authors conclude that the CEAE course is an effective tool for teaching ethical advertising principles in the university setting.

Keywords

ethics, advertising ethics, certificate course, certification, undergraduate, education, curriculum, marketing

If I were asked to name the deadliest subversive force within capitalism--the single greatest source of its waning morality--I should without hesitation name advertising.

— Robert L. Heilbroner (1981)

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The field of advertising is not generally acknowledged as a symbol of preeminent ethical standards, as much as we might prefer to think otherwise. In fact, it is more likely to be held up as an example of ethical lapses (e.g., [Amazeen, 2016](#); [Snyder, 2008](#); [Treise et al., 1994](#)) and regularly is ranked as one of the least ethical professions (e.g., [Gallup, 2023](#)). Yet, this deficiency is especially concerning in a communication field, where a lack of trust can undermine the very act of communication. If consumers don't trust an ad, that ad won't be successful at promoting anything. Moreover, when consumers come to learn some ads are unethical, they may grow skeptical of all advertising (including those ads that are ethically sound) ([Darke et al., 2010](#); [Helm, 2004](#)).

Changes in the marketplace, too, have injected new ethical concerns that may add weight to the field's need for new hires to be adequately sensitized to such issues. Data collection and use, for example, has grown every year over the past three decades and has introduced a panoply of potential misuses of private information ([Jones et al., 2022](#)). Moreover, artificial intelligence (AI) is contributing previously unimaginable ethical threats into the practice of advertising ([Rodgers & Nguyen, 2022](#)). Though AI offers many potential benefits to the advertising industry (e.g., efficiency, idea generation, and low-cost creative), it poses numerous ethical risks such as privacy concerns in its use of algorithms, misinformation and bias, lack of transparency, as well as inappropriate or insensitive ad placement.

Given this rapidly compounding problem, we might expect considerations around advertising ethics to serve as a central driving force for university advertising programs. As [Amazeen \(2016, p. 41\)](#) concludes, "Failure to educate students in the ethical practice of advertising is a disservice not only to students but also to the profession and society overall." However, few university programs actually offer any course dedicated to advertising ethics ([Fullerton et al., 2013](#)).

As of 2009, there appeared to be no textbooks dedicated to ad ethics ([Stuhlfaut & Farrell, 2009](#)), though there have since been a couple of "advertising and society" books incorporating topics with serious ethical dimensions ([Holm, 2023](#); [Pardun, 2013](#)) and some "media ethics" books with a section on advertising, amongst other topics such as journalism, public relations, and entertainment (e.g., [Christians et al., 2024](#)). One factor that might contribute to this seeming lack of a serious ethics component in advertising education is the lack of faculty trained in this area ([Gandz & Hayes, 1988](#); [McDonald & Donleavy, 1995](#)), as most advertising faculty are trained in other specialties.

That is not to say, of course, that ethics is entirely ignored by these programs. Over the years, there has been an ongoing debate about whether ethics should be taught as its own course or integrated into virtually every class ([Amazeen, 2016](#)). This debate echoes through the history of business schools, where the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), since at least 1974, has required business schools to "infuse" ethics into their curricula ([Sims & Felton, 2006](#)).

De Los Reyes and colleagues (2016) conclude that in the 21st Century business schools began teaching ethics more than previously. This might be, in part, a reflection of the coterminous growth of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) function within large businesses, since that function normally incorporates some aspect of ethical considerations, along with philanthropic and other social sensitivity concerns. This also would seem to correspond to an increase in news headlines about corporate scandals (Sims & Felton, 2006).

While journalism schools and business schools do offer journalism and business ethics courses, respectively, it is unclear to what extent advertising ethics is covered. Nor do we know how many non-ethics advertising courses have any real ethics content. The net result is that we know little about how much ethics training advertising students are obtaining, but it likely is less than what the industry may need to help elevate this field's ethical practice—and, hence, its reputation—in the coming years.

If schools are not properly preparing aspiring advertising practitioners to fit ethical variables into their strategic analyses or decision-making, as they develop campaigns, new generations of professionals are likely to continue exhibiting what Drumwright and Murphy (2004) termed “Moral Myopia,” where they are unable to recognize those problems, and “Moral Muteness,” where they do recognize the problems but simply ignore them.

Regardless of what might seem to be a significant need, we're fairly ignorant about the ethical training, literacy, or attitudes students currently hold. Far more research has explored what methods or approaches should be used to teach business or advertising ethics (e.g., Amazeen, 2016; Block & Cwik, 2007; de Los Reyes et al., 2016; Martinson, 2006; Sims & Felton, 2006) than has looked at what students already know or believe.

However, Fullerton and colleagues (2013) conducted a national survey aimed at measuring advertising student opinions on the subject, providing a few insights. Among their findings, they discovered that just 1 in 4 students considered advertising to be a highly ethical field, while 9 of 10 felt working for a highly ethical company was important to them. Students also displayed gender differences in their attitudes toward what constituted ethical failures, with women finding more situations unethical.

The effects of ethics instruction have also been explored. Gale and Bunton (2005) conducted a survey of advertising and public relations alumni of two schools, one public and one private. The public school offered an elective ethics course, while the private school's program required such a course. While 86% of alums who had completed an ethics course felt they were more aware of ethical issues in their professions, only 38.6% of those who took no such course felt such awareness. More than half who took the course claimed they had drawn on ideas they learned in that course when talking about ethics with colleagues. These alums, like the students in the studies above, also believed studying ethics was important, and specifically that it could lead to elevating ethics within their professions. Their rear-view perspective indicates a positive impact on the professions, thanks to ethics training. This is consistent with the findings of Glenn (1992) in a meta-analysis of 10 studies that looked at course impact.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the utility of a new tool for teaching principles of ethical advertising to university students. The tool is a fully online, self-paced certificate course offered by the Institute for Advertising Ethics (a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization). Regardless of whether a university teaches Advertising Ethics as a standalone course or as a topic embedded in other courses (e.g., Advertising & Society), the certification course investigated here represents, potentially, a new teaching tool. The course is called Certified Ethical Advertising Executive (CEAE) and is designed to teach 9 principles of ethical advertising (see [Figure 1](#)).

In this exploratory study, we required undergraduate students to take the CEAE training course and then measured their attitudes toward advertising ethics and also their beliefs in their own self-efficacy pertaining to ethical advertising (e.g., their ability to detect ethical issues). Due to the exploratory nature of the research, specific hypotheses were not established. Instead, we focused on the following research questions:

RQ1: Do students show a greater awareness of the importance of advertising ethics after completing CEAE training (compared to students who have not completed the training)?

RQ2: Do students feel a greater sense of self-efficacy with regard to advertising ethics after completing CEAE training (compared to students who have not completed the training)?

Method

Participants

As detailed below in the Materials and Procedure section, data collection took place over two time periods. Time 1 (no certification) was Spring semester, 2023. Students in the Spring semester received the typical curriculum in their courses with no additional ethics training. Data collection took place in the second-to-last week of semester (i.e., April 2023). Time 2 (post-certification) was Fall semester, 2023. As detailed below, the CEAE certification was required in the Fall courses. Time 2 data collection took place in the second-to-last week of semester (i.e., December 2023).

Participants were undergraduate students who were recruited from marketing courses at the first author's primary institution. [Table 1](#) shows a summary of the participant samples at both time points. The gender split was roughly equal at both times. Age was comparable at both times, as was the percentage of students representing each of two courses from which recruitment took place (i.e., Marketing and Consumer Behavior).

Materials and Procedure

The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board at [The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Endicott College]. The research

Principles of Ethical Advertising

Principle 1

Advertising, public relations, marketing communications, news, and editorial all share a common objective of truth and high ethical standards in serving the public.

Principle 2

Advertising public relations, and all marketing communications professionals have an obligation to exercise the highest personal ethics in the creation and dissemination of commercial information to consumers.

Principle 3

Advertisers should clearly distinguish advertising, public relations and corporate communications from news and editorial content and entertainment, both online and offline.

Principle 4

Advertisers should clearly disclose all material conditions, such as payment or receipt of a free product, affecting endorsements in social and traditional channels, as well as the identity of endorsers, all in the interest of full disclosure and transparency.

Principle 5

Advertisers should treat consumers fairly based on the nature of the audience to whom the ads are directed and the nature of the product or service advertised.

Principle 6

Advertisers should never compromise consumers' personal privacy in marketing communications, and their choices as to whether to participate in providing their information should be transparent and easily made.

Principle 7

Advertisers should follow federal, state and local advertising laws, and cooperate with industry self-regulatory programs for the resolution of advertising practices.

Principle 8

Advertisers and their agencies, and online and offline media, should discuss privately potential ethical concerns, and members of the team creating ads should be given permission to express internally their ethical concerns.

Principle 9

Trust between advertising and public relations business partners, including clients, and their agencies, media vendors, and third party suppliers, should be built upon transparency and full disclosure of business ownership and arrangements, agency remuneration and rebates, and media incentives.



Get certified: <https://www.iaethics.org/get-certified>

Figure 1. Nine principles of ethical advertising (Institute for Advertising Ethics, 2024).

Table 1. Participant Samples at Time 1 (No Certification) and Time 2 (Post-certification).

Time	Time 1 (no certification)	Time 2 (post-certification)
Sample size	80 (83 recruited, 3 removed)	112 (117 recruited, 5 removed)
Gender	46.25% male ($n = 37$) 53.75% female ($n = 43$) 0 other genders	55.4% male ($n = 62$) 44.6% female ($n = 50$) 0 other genders
Age	18–22 ($M = 19.94$, $SD = 0.93$)	18–23 ($M = 19.76$, $SD = 0.99$)
Courses	78.8% ($n = 63$) Marketing 21.3% ($n = 17$) Consumer Behavior	76.8% ($n = 86$) Marketing 23.2% ($n = 26$) Consumer Behavior

Note. Participants were removed if they answered no questions other than age, gender, and course.

involved comparison of students' attitudes toward advertising ethics and their self-efficacy around advertising ethics at two points in time, using data collected via online surveys. Time 1 was near the end of Spring semester. During the spring semester, the typical curriculum was delivered, with no treatment. Time 2 was near the end of the subsequent Fall semester. During the Fall semester, students received the typical curriculum plus the CEAE training. All students in the Fall semester courses were required to complete the CEAE certification. Students were unaware that the CEAE certification was part of a research study. They were assigned the task just as they would be assigned a typical assignment in a course. There was 100% adherence to the certification requirement (i.e., all students in Time 2 had completed the required certification). Time 2 data collection took place at least 5 weeks after the treatment in each course, to minimize any priming effect.

At Time 1 and Time 2, students were recruited from all sections of two required marketing courses (Marketing; Consumer Behavior). This was done to maximize the participant sample, since the class sizes are small at the school where recruitment took place. These courses are typically taken by sophomores and juniors. As illustrated in Table 1, the participant samples were highly comparable at both times. The content and assessment in these courses were identical at both times, except that at Time 2, weightings of assessment items were adjusted slightly to allow the CEAE certification to count for assignment points in each course (10% of the final grade in the Marketing course and 5% of the final grade in the Consumer Behavior course). The instructors teaching the courses did not differ from Time 1 to Time 2.

The "treatment" used in this study was the online CEAE training program offered by the Institute for Advertising Ethics (a 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization based in the United States). The certificate course is hosted online via Canvas (a learning management system). Students each paid \$25 to receive access to the certificate course. Payments were made directly to the Institute for Advertising Ethics via their website. Students would then receive an email taking them directly to the Canvas platform to commence their work. Any student experiencing financial hardship could request a scholarship which would allow them to complete the certification free of charge.

Once logged into the CEAE course on Canvas, students saw a welcome video (3 minutes) and received instructions on how to navigate the course. They were informed that they could stop and start their work at any time and did not need to complete it all in one sitting. Students completed the work on their own time (outside of class meeting times) and submitted their certificate to their instructor as proof of completion. Upon receipt of the certificate, the instructor awarded assignment points in their online grade book.

The CEAE course teaches the 9 Principles of Ethical Advertising (see [Figure 1](#)). The course takes approximately 2.5 hours, total. A summary of the different modules and topics covered is outlined in [Table 2](#). Upon completion of the course, each student received a badge which they could post on their LinkedIn profile or resumé. They also received invitations to join any of the seven Special Interest Councils offered by the Institute for Advertising Ethics. The Special Interest Councils are free to access and allow CEAE certificate holders the opportunity to network, engage in discussion, view resources, and explore other advertising ethics topics in-depth. Special Interest Council topics available at the time of data collection included Advertising to Children, Ethics versus Law, Ad Fraud, AI in advertising, Food Labelling, Conscious Attention, and Retail Ethics. More topics (e.g., Greenwashing) have since been added.

As mentioned above, survey data were collected to facilitate comparison of attitudes toward advertising ethics and feelings of self-efficacy from students who did not complete the certification versus students who had completed the CEAE certification. The survey was hosted online via Qualtrics. It was identical at Time 1 (no certification) and Time 2 (post-certification). The survey consisted of 15 questions and was typically completed in just under 2 minutes (average completion time = 1 minute, 52 seconds). Survey questions included age, gender, and course code. Following these, were six items about attitudes toward ethics (e.g., “It is important for businesses to engage in ethical advertising practices”) and six items regarding the participant’s own personal beliefs and future behavioral intentions (e.g., “I feel confident in my ability to identify unethical advertising practices”). Each of these twelve items was measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

[Table 3](#) in the Results section shows the exact wording of all 12 items. Note that 3 of the 12 items were worded in a direction opposed to the desired learning outcomes (e.g., “I would be willing to engage in unethical advertising practices if it meant making more money”). This was intended to reduce social desirability bias in responding. Likewise, the survey was entirely anonymous in an attempt to reduce bias in responding.

All participants voluntarily completed the survey. Recruitment took place in the classroom. The researcher visited all sections of the courses relevant to this study. She introduced herself and explained that she was “interested to know how students feel about advertising and marketing ethics.” She further explained that she was inviting students to complete a voluntary, anonymous online survey intended to let her know how students feel about advertising and marketing efforts and that the survey was not intended in any way to assess the students’ professor. The researcher did not mention the CEAE certification when administering the survey. Students were then given a TinyURL link to the survey and were asked to spend a few minutes taking the survey in

Table 2. Summary of CEAE Modules and Topics Taught.

Module		Topics	Description
Preliminary materials	Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome message • Information about the Institute for Advertising Ethics • How to navigate the CEAE course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short videos and written information • No assessment in this module
	Before you Begin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How to progress through modules • Minimum performance required to proceed • How to track progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short videos and written information • No assessment in this module
Primary learning materials	Session 1: The Importance of Advertising Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Business Case for Advertising Ethics • The Personal Case for Advertising Ethics • Truthfulness in Advertising • Fairness to audience in advertising • Racial Inclusivity in Advertising • Social Media and Advertising • Offense in Advertising 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each topic is taught in a video with voiceover and closed captions • Videos are 3–8 minutes long • Each video is followed by a quiz • Students must meet the minimum requirement on each quiz to progress through the topics in each module • Minimum requirements are clearly stated and are around 70% on each quiz • Students can repeat quizzes as many times as needed to progress to the next topic
	Session 2: Building Trust Through Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building Trust Through Transparency • Transparency and Consumer Data • Transparency in Business Dealings • Ad Fraud 	
	Session 3: Achieving Advertising Ethics in a Competitive Marketplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing Ethical Cultures • Achieving Enhanced Advertising Ethics • Continuing Your Commitment 	
End of course	After Your Certification: Next Steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfaction survey (optional) • Register for Special Interest Councils (optional) • Receive badge (option to post on LinkedIn or other social media) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These steps are optional but are used to encourage students to stay engaged with the topic and further their learning about advertising ethics

the classroom. The researcher told all students: “If you prefer not to take the survey that’s totally fine. You can spend the next few minutes doing some other activity on your laptop and I won’t know if you took the survey or not.” Note that all students at this school are required to carry a laptop to class every day. Students then opened their laptops and either took the survey or did some other activity. The researcher left the room during this time.

Table 3. Comparison of Students' Attitudes Toward Ethics From Time 1 (Control Group—No Certification) to Time 2 (Treatment Group—Post-Certification).

Survey item	Time	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>
1. It is important for businesses to engage in ethical advertising practices	1	80	4.14	.81	-4.48***
	2	112	4.62	.60	
2. Businesses should focus on making profit, even if that means their practices aren't entirely ethical	1	80	2.50	.75	3.30**
	2	112	2.13	.80	
3. A business that focuses solely on profit is not an ethical business	1	80	3.25	1.09	0.30
	2	112	3.21	.95	
4. A business that focuses solely on ethics cannot be profitable	1	80	2.36	.90	1.10
	2	111	2.22	.91	
5. Customers have better relationships with businesses that are ethical	1	80	4.03	.68	-2.43*
	2	112	4.27	.70	
6. Employees are more satisfied when they work for businesses that have high ethical standards	1	80	4.04	.70	-2.51**
	2	112	4.27	.57	
7. I Learned a lot about ethics in this course	1	79	3.73	.84	-2.80***
	2	110	4.05	.61	
8. I feel confident in my ability to identify unethical advertising practices	1	79	3.89	.64	-3.71***
	2	110	4.20	.52	
9. I feel confident in my ability to engage in ethical advertising practices	1	79	3.97	.66	-2.75**
	2	110	4.20	.47	
10. I would be willing to engage in unethical advertising practices if it meant making more money	1	79	2.65	.73	3.42***
	2	108	2.23	.87	
11. I believe it is important to speak up when a colleague suggests doing something that is unethical	1	79	3.78	.61	-2.02*
	2	110	3.97	.64	
12. I am interested to learn more about ethical advertising practices	1	79	3.96	.49	.34
	2	110	3.93	.81	

* $p < .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Results

Data from Time 1 (no certification) and Time 2 (post-certification) were compared using t-tests for each of the 12 survey items. Significant differences were identified for 9 of the 12 items. In each case, the difference was in the expected direction. Specifically, post-certification, students agreed significantly more strongly that

- it is important for businesses to engage in ethical advertising practices (item 1),
- customers have better relationships with businesses that are ethical (item 5),
- employees are more satisfied when they work for businesses that have high ethical standards (item 6),
- they learned a lot about ethics in the course (item 7),
- they felt confident in their ability to identify unethical advertising practices (item 8),

- they felt confident in their ability to engage in ethical advertising practices (item 9), and
 - it is important to speak up when a colleague suggests doing something that is unethical (item 11).
- Post certification, they agreed significantly less that
- businesses should focus on making profit even if doing so is unethical (item 2), and
 - they would be willing to engage in unethical advertising practices if it meant making more money (item 10).

Three of the twelve items showed no significant difference at Time 2 versus Time 1. Interestingly, one of these items was “I am interested to learn more about ethical advertising practices” which had high levels of agreement at both Time 1 ($M = 3.96$, $SD = .49$) and Time 2 ($M = 3.93$, $SD = .81$), $t = 0.34$, $p = .74$. These high ratings at both time points suggest the undergraduate students sampled here are eager for ethics training. This may be indicative of social desirability responding; however (as noted above), the survey was anonymous in an attempt to reduce biased responses.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to determine whether the CEAE course is a useful tool to teach advertising ethics to undergraduate students. Comparing responses of students who have not completed CEAE training to responses from students who have completed the training, we see significantly greater awareness of advertising ethics and significantly greater feelings of self-efficacy among students who have completed the training. Student interest in learning more about ethical advertising practices does not differ significantly based on whether or not they have completed the CEAE training. Student interest is high at both times. This finding is consistent with Gale and Bunton's (2005) study of alumni who believed studying ethics was important.

The two other items that showed no significant shift in attitudes after students completed the CEAE course were “A business that focuses solely on profit is not an ethical business” and “A business that focuses solely on ethics cannot be profitable.” Students' responses were close to the mid-point of the scale for these items at all times. Further research would be needed to learn more about why these judgments don't shift after taking CEAE training. At face value, though, the results seem to suggest students are perhaps confused about the connection between (un)ethical advertising practices and profit. This suggests an opportunity for development of the CEAE curriculum and/or classroom curriculum in general.

Readers of this paper who are interested in incorporating the CEAE training in their curriculum can visit the Institute for Advertising Ethics website (<https://www.iaethics.org/what-is-the-iae-certification>) to learn more about the course and to request a free inspection copy. The authors of this paper have since incorporated CEAE training into

an Advertising and Society course (undergraduate, in-person course) and a Strategic Communication course (online, asynchronous, master's level) at the second author's institution. Anecdotal evidence suggests the course is well-received in-person and online by undergraduate and graduate students.

One of the benefits of administering the CEAE course as a for-credit assignment is that students can easily provide instructors with proof of course completion. As previously mentioned, students who participated in this study were required to submit their completion certificate to their instructors to earn assignment credit. The certificates issued in the CEAE course are blockchain enabled. This means students are unable to forge a certification.

Limitations

This study was limited in its sample coming from only one small private school and comprising only undergraduate students. This limits the generalizability of findings. The CEAE course is marketed for use with undergraduate and graduate students (as well as industry practitioners). Further research is needed to determine how effective the course is in other schools and for teaching more advanced graduate students.

Future research

Future research might examine similar research questions with graduate students and also practitioners. The CEAE course is designed to be completed by any individual with current or future careers in advertising or marketing. This includes undergraduate students, graduate students, and also industry practitioners. In addition to studying graduate students and practitioners, future research could be conducted to determine the long-term impact of CEAE certification. For example, surveying certified individuals months or years after they have completed training could determine whether the training results in more ethical practices or if the effects are fleeting.

It is also recommended that future research could investigate the ease of use for instructors who incorporate advertising ethics training (be it CEAE training or other methods) into their curriculum. The CEAE course outlined here has many benefits for instructors. These include relatively low cost to students, availability of scholarships to allow free training for any students experiencing financial hardships, blockchain-enabled certificates, and auto-graded work so there is no additional grading burden for instructors who choose to incorporate the certification into their curriculum. Nonetheless, we did not specifically gather data on ease of use from instructors and so this could be an area for future study.

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