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Epistemically Dysfunctional Shortcuts in Advertising

Abstract: Epistemic injustice is a topic that has seldom been approached in the context of advertising representations. Yet, advertising has particular features that make it especially apt in creating, consolidating, or perpetuating epistemic injustice, in many of its forms: by providing elements that create a credibility deficit for a social category, by misrepresenting the point of view of a social group, by engaging in hermeneutical marginalization of the values that the members of the group adhere to. Among these features, a prominent one is advertising’s propensity for shortcuts, simplified cognitive routes that proceed from seemingly obvious *background knowledge* and lead to seemingly logical conclusions that often end up misinforming people about an important domain of social life. The present work proceeds from a description of the reasons why advertisers are tempted follow shortcuts in their creative work, followed by an outline of the epistemic dimension of advertising and by an explanation of basic notions of epistemic injustice. In the end, two examples are provided to show the rhetorical action of advertising shortcuts and to analyze their effect on the representations that different social groups cultivate about each other.

Keywords: representational practices in advertising, credibility deficit, hermeneutical marginalisation, epistemic injustice

1. The pressure to produce *shortcuts* in advertising practice

Advertising is essentially the activity of providing reasons with the intent to persuade the audience to take into consideration the offer of a brand — be it a product, a service, a civic initiative, a social cause, a political platform, a company or a public institution. Sometimes, these reasons are explicitly stated and are related to a pragmatic benefit that the

user will have upon accepting the offer. At other times, these reasons are implicit and are related to the *ethos* of the brand (the personality that is attributed to it, the authorial voice that its advertising develops). *Ethotic* argumentation in advertising can mean that a brand's advertising promotes a certain lifestyle, a certain set of values, a certain approach to a specific problem, while the name of the brand only appears as a supporter of that idea (Grancea 2016, 382-386).

Both lines of argumentation are often artificially simplified, becoming excessively *thinned* approaches to the issue that constitutes the object of the campaign. Advertising creators are often pressed to find cognitive shortcuts to make the object of a campaign more accessible to an audience. What causes this pressure?

First, one must mention the classical format of advertising that is always short and compressed, be it a 30-second video commercial or radio spot, a static image with accompanying text that becomes a print or a social media post. In general, such tight format does not seem to be encouraging complex argument elaboration. A widely-held piece of practical wisdom in advertising is that an ad must be based on a single idea, must be cleansed off of any elements that distract from that idea and that the idea itself must be *radical* and stimulate a category of emotions (Newman 82, 114, 150, 368). Multiple ideas or nuanced issues are therefore often seen as mistaken in advertising industry, in the sense that they do not respect an implicit advertising *grammar* and that they make it difficult for the consumer to remember something specific about the brand.

Secondly, copywriters and art directors are often required to stimulate immediate reactions to their messages. In most cases, there is not enough time to build on an idea, to reveal it progressively to the audience, to debate the grey areas or to patiently evaluate alternatives. Online advertising has made it possible for precise metrics to quantify the number of these instant reactions. Phatic communion is often a shortcut that wins rapidly the hearts of the audience and easily diverts their attention from the argumentative core of an issue (Miller 2017, 251, Grădinaru 2018, 467-468). Feeling that a brand mirrors the values of their group can often mean a heightened interest for the brand and a decreased interest to explore alternatives or to analyze critically what is beyond the rhetorical surface of the brand. Phatic messages, aimed at reinforcing the values that hold a group together, are shortcuts used heavily by advertisers, knowing that the emotion stirred by them is a powerful incentive for people to react.

Another cause for the propensity towards shortcuts in advertising content may actually be that these shortcuts are honestly held to be true by the creators of the content. It often happens for tight deadlines to not leave enough time for the entire team to understand the subject well. Ideally, a professional creator of advertising content should know a lot about the object of the campaign from the research team, from the account executive or directly from the client. But sometimes advertising budgets are limited, and therefore there is no team doing an extensive research, at other times the client may be reluctant to share important information about his business, or the account executives may already be overwhelmed by the number of tasks they receive and not manage to ensure the proper flow of information. Finally, the creators of advertising content might themselves be (unconsciously) biased against a certain topic, and this bias would make their approach on the topic rather shallow, a shallowness that will impact their subsequent work.

But when do these shortcuts become epistemically dysfunctional? To explore the answer to this question, we must first understand the epistemic dimension of advertising. Indeed, it is the persuasive function of advertising that is most prominent, both in real communication practices and in the research undertaken in this field. But advertising also influences our knowledge-acquiring practices and influences the content of the implicit premises in many of the thinking processes that we engage in on daily basis.

2. The epistemic dimension of advertising

Apart from being a source of information on the promises made by brands to their audience, advertising is also an important part of the incidental learning process through which we gain *background knowledge* about the world we inhabit, about what is normal or desirable to do in this world, about who else inhabits this world except for our in-group (Borgerson and Schroeder 2008, 91; Merskin 2014, 188). Although advertising is in general not the primary source of knowledge about these topics, and its influence will certainly be moderated by many cultural and personal factors, it still deserves a lot of attention for at least two reasons: its pervasiveness and its repetitive character (Borgerson and Schroeder 2008, 91, 98). Apart from these two characteristics that give it a great weight in our incidental learning processes, we may add the fact that advertising often becomes a topic for discussion in many other formal and informal circles than the media that initially broadcasted it, it permeates

popular culture and often becomes part of our socializing processes, while the advertised brands become repositories of cultural symbols and themes people use to forge a sense of identity, of belonging, of assumption-sharing, of fashionability and so on (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 868).

The shortcuts proposed by advertising sometimes discourage or redirect people's willingness to openly inquire about a part of the social reality. These shortcuts can become epistemically dysfunctional in several ways: by creating the illusion of knowledge and the inability to realize one's own cognitive incompetence on a topic; by cultivating the habits of the mind that are already deeply entrenched in a society, such as treating a certain social category according to predetermined contempt while remaining ignorant of its complex reality; by entertaining false dichotomies which impede further exploration of a topic and create the premises of self-radicalization.

Of particular interest would be those cases when advertising shortcuts influence in a negative manner people's flow of knowledge in what regards human essence, human flourishing, or the fully human character of a particular group (Borgerson and Schroeder 2008, 94). Misdirecting or altering people's inquiry on these topics is not a process that can be as easily reversed as that which involves the exaggeration of some product benefits. Tests of truth are difficult to make in the case of social representations. Disproving a particular information that one is attached to will be extremely difficult in this area, where confirmation bias and imperfect realities may tempt anyone into drawing rapid and ill-formed conclusions. Showing that a practice of knowledge-acquiring is faulty will also be difficult, especially when it has become part of the social world one inhabits to such an extent, that it seems natural or self-understood to apply when investigating a topic related to human existence (Lewis 2011, 132-133).

There is a distinct epistemic dimension that has received less attention in the studies that approach the representations of humans and humanity in advertising. As I will show in the following section, the studies that deal with this type of representations in advertising are generally focused on how people feel about their representations in advertising, about how their self-confidence and dignity are affected by advertising content, about how others will tend to relate to them after being exposed to particular advertising themes. But the (lack of) knowledge and trust between social groups should not only be discussed in terms of peaceful and respectful conduct towards one another. Slander, libel, misrepresentation, impossibility for reasonable public debates,

endemic ignorance, unequal access to the common pool of hermeneutic resources are major problems that can erode a society at its core. If advertising shortcuts contribute to this lack of mutual knowledge and cultivate the epistemic vices that maintain it on a societal level, then there must be more to their analysis than their degree of adhering to the principles of political correctness and acceptable representation.

3. What is missing in the usual critique of social representations in advertising

One of the most frequent accusations that advertising has to face is oversimplification of the identity of a certain social group (Hall 1997, 258): homogenizing representational practices are thought to be damaging to people in several ways. First, they are thought to be unrealistic, because the members of a social group are always diverse, their capabilities and their life projects differ, so advertising should not create the false impression that they are all the same (Rozanova 2010, 213). For example, studies of visual ageism (Loos and Ivan 2018, 172-173) have shown that people who are old feel uncomfortable even if their depiction in advertising is positive, but it includes traits that they can no longer have, or aspirations that they do not share – for example, the physically apt old person who travels a lot and lives a very active life is not everyone's ideal, neither is it within everyone's reach to live that type of life. Insisting on that representation can fuel a social pressure on the old, to overcome their 'condition' of living a silent, peaceful life, in which they cook and knit for the dear ones, which is represented as a second-rate option. But this option may be exactly the one they prefer.

Another accusation that advertising has to face is that of attributing minor or peripheral roles to certain social categories, making them seem unimportant to social life and unworthy of much attention. The concept of 'absence through presence' (Borgerson and Schroeder 2008, 99), similar somewhat to that of dysphemistic representation (Martinez Lirola 2014, 405) point to the diminishment of the fully human character of a social category that is hidden under anonymity and thus deemed unworthy of moral respect.

But also representations that bring a social category in the center of attention can be problematic. Native-Americans who are presented as savages, therefore elements belonging more to nature and less to the social world (Green 1993, 323), women that are presented as silent bodies object to male admiration or who are empowered only by their

sexual agency (Gill 2008, 52-55) have also been criticized for distorting perception regarding the full human nature of these social categories. In addition, advertising depictions should respect the signifying practices and moral sensitivities of those represented and not reuse their symbols or their traditions at will, refashioning them for commercial purposes (Merskin 2014, 187-188).

All in all, Borgerson and Schroeder propose that a good-faith representation in advertising would necessarily need to recognize the complex, fully open, diverse, and dynamic character of human life and human projects (Borgerson and Schroeder 2008, 96).

What all these approaches have in common is their emphasis on the consequences that certain representations will have on the feelings and self-concepts of those represented.

But one important problem that is missing in this picture is the recognition of the members of the represented group as epistemic subjects that can have relevant experiences and relevant knowledge, worthy of being shared with the other members of society. On this level, advertising representations should avoid creating, consolidating or amplifying a credibility deficit or an intelligibility deficit that these social groups may face in a systematic manner in that society: not being invested with trust or not being understood when trying to share their knowledge with others. Such forms of epistemic injustice have received a lot of attention in the past decade of studies in virtue epistemology. In the following section, these concepts will be further explained.

4. Forms of *epistemic injustice* and the role of advertising in perpetuating them

Epistemic injustice generally refers to the cases in which someone's status as a source of knowledge is implicitly or explicitly contested, diminished or altogether denied on epistemically irrelevant grounds (Fricker 2007, 2016). Usually, it happens when the hearer holds a conscious or an unconscious prejudice against the social group to which the speaker belongs. Miranda Fricker distinguishes between two types of epistemic injustice: *testimonial* injustice and *hermeneutical* injustice.

A testimonial injustice occurs when the hearer of a testimony does not accept (parts of) it as serious and trustworthy because he/she has a prejudice against the group of people to which the giver of the testimony belongs. Miranda Fricker explains that she first insisted on testimony for particular reasons, but as the theory developed she became

convinced that any other types of assertoric speech-acts can be (and often are) confronted with the same credibility deficit. So, in spite of the technical term, *testimonial* injustice can cover a wide variety of cases in which an opinion, a view, a suggestion, a question (Fricker 2016, 145-147) is rejected, deemed irrelevant or untrustworthy not because of some faults in its content, but because of hearer's perception of the speaker as a source of knowledge.

Miranda Fricker emphasizes the fact that, beyond the moral aspects that need to be well understood in the phenomenon of epistemic injustice, there is also an epistemic problem that ensues: the ignorance in that epistemic system will grow (Fricker 2016, 147-149), as epistemic injustice leads to the rejection of potentially valuable sources of knowledge and experience. People who display an epistemically unjust behavior do not only miss the chance of their own increase in knowledge, but they also lead to the missing out of many chances of epistemic improvement in the community at large. This problem can be increased by another form of *testimonial injustice* that can appear: sometimes, while one the statements of one speaker are faced with credibility deficit, the statements of another speaker can benefit from credibility excess. The accumulation of repeated episodes of epistemic injustice (performed in both directions) can lead to distorted perceptions of social reality, because the points of view characteristic to one category of sources are systematically marginalized, not engaged with, or disbelieved.

A second form of epistemic injustice identified by Miranda Fricker is called *hermeneutical injustice* and it refers to the situations when a speaker's words are confronted with an intelligibility deficit, because the system of concepts and values of that person's social group are not known to the hearer (or are not sufficiently well understood by the hearer). Cases of *hermeneutical injustice* are diverse, but what they have in common is this lack of understanding for the concepts one person uses to make sense of her experiences, because these concepts are insufficiently known by the rest of the society (Fricker 2016, 149-155). It is often caused by what Fricker calls *hermeneutical marginalisation* — the situation in which one social group does not have the opportunity to contribute equally to the pool of hermeneutical resources in a society.

This second form of epistemic injustice can also increase ignorance in an epistemic system, especially when the arguments of the people coming from that group will sound unacceptable by default, because they do not fit the axiological system embraced by the other groups. Of course, here one can imagine many cases where the clash of

hermeneutical frames, even when known to each other, will not lead to mutual understanding, but to an escalation of conflict. But Miranda Fricker does not pretend mutual knowledge will solve all problems that come from these incompatibilities, she just shows that in itself it is a major problem because in extreme cases it makes the social experiences of a person unintelligible to the other members of society.

Another form of epistemic injustice appears at the level of transmitting one's ideas further: sometimes, the person doing the transmitting selects, distorts, or misrepresents the point of view expressed initially by the person (Mark Alfano and Brian Robinson 2017, 476, 481). In the worst cases, the misrepresentation is taken seriously by another person or group, who feels the duty to defend the opposite point of view. An intense debate is then stirred without any real object, because the entire discussion is caused by a *straw man* intentionally or unintentionally thrown to the epistemic community by means of a transmission error. Ignorance in the system inevitably grows in such cases, too, especially when the diversion creates an unfortunate situation where the real issues are not addressed. Transmission errors can be caused by *conduit vices* of a person or social group, who is unable or unwilling to understand correctly what has been said and report accurately on it, but they can also be caused by an endemic intelligibility deficit that a social group is confronted with.

The shortcuts advertising adopts can relate in various ways to epistemic injustice. First, certain patterns of social representation that advertising uses can create a *credibility deficit* for the people represented. Most of the reductionist, homogenizing or typified representations that have been discussed in the previous section of this article can fit in this category. A frequent excuse that is used when questioning these representations is that they were already *there*, in society, and that advertising only mirrors them. It is tempting to say that this a good excuse for a person who works in advertising to not engage in representational ethics at all and put all the blame on the strategic component, which means that people's values need to be echoed by advertising.

However, on closer inspection, this idea is dangerous, for at least two reasons. One is that social reality is not an independent, fixed, objective reality. It is dynamic and it is largely made by our collective intentions, our collective thoughts and actions, and our decisions to maintain or to dismantle a certain axiology matter. Worsening the condition of an already underrepresented group in society or amplifying the prejudice against a category of people cannot be justified in this

manner, saying they were already there. It is precisely because they are *there*, as wounds in our social body, we need to do all the efforts we can to not deepen them further.

The other reason why this idea should be rejected altogether is that it may lead to the systematic silencing of certain categories of people. What if the person proven to have committed a testimonial injustice to another would invoke the same excuse, that this is a widespread view in our society? What if the participants in a debate, proven to be committed an *ad hominem* fallacy, would say that everybody does it? Would that excuse them? It is because wrong views are widespread already in society that we need to be extremely attentive at not encouraging their perpetuation.

Secondly, in advertising discourse at large, *hermeneutical injustice* can lead to many people's values to be presented in a ridiculous manner, oversimplified or distorted altogether. Hermeneutical marginalisation can come from advertising's emphasis on certain systems of representation that are built to justify overconsumption: people who do not see beauty, comfort, or safety in the terms proposed by advertising will often have a hard time explaining their position to the people immersed in the world of brands, who have fully embraced the implicit axiology that advertising for those categories of products rests on.

Finally, in adversarial advertising, when there is a political or a civic stake, misrepresentation of the opposite point of view can be used as a tool to divert public attention in the direction wanted by the sponsor of the campaign. These cases would fit under the category of *transmission errors* and should be analyzed in the context of epistemic injustice, as well. Although these debates are permeating social culture, and both mass-media and social media contribute to certain transmission errors, yet advertising can (and often does) have its own distinct share in the creation and perpetuation of *straw man* fallacies.

In the following section, I bring the example of two Romanian advertising campaigns that had a distinct contribution in the perpetuation of all the aforementioned categories of epistemic injustice.

Case Study 1: Perpetuating an *error of transmission* in advertising

In October 2018, a Referendum was organized in Romania for people to vote YES or NO regarding the modification of the Constitutional article referring to marriage. The modified version would

mention *a man* and *a woman* instead of the initial formulation of *spouses*. This measure was seen as preventing homosexual couples from gaining legal recognition of their union. Predictably, the public space was marked by the clash of interpretive frames on the meaning of marriage between Christian points of view firmly in favor of the modification, on one side, and LGBTQ advocates firmly against the issue, on the other.

One advertising agency, Papaya Advertising, created two distinct campaigns that proposed to engage with the theme: in one of them, the *traditional family* is only a creative theme, while the main topic is the product (a brand of lime called *Savana*)¹, but the other one is explicitly inviting people to boycott the Referendum (the viral video is called *The Children of the Referendum*)².

In the first campaign, the one for the brand of lime, the agency committed an easily detectable *error of transmission*, thus doing an epistemic injustice both to the proponents of the Referendum and to the public opinion at large: they tied the concept of a non-traditional family to various images of single mothers who take care of their children, parents who have adopted a child, couples that choose homeschooling or remote work to spend more time together, fashionable mothers that drive a motorcycle and choose atypical colors to paint the walls of their home. These images were united by the slogan ‘Life has more nuances. We have one for each of you’, followed by the name of the brand.

The campaign was explicitly meant to contribute to the Referendum debate, as its creators and its supporters admitted in many interviews³. The explicit reference in the video of the campaign is made by the modern mother, who rides a motorcycle, has a tattoo and an atypical pet (an Iguana), and opts for an atypical color of lime for her home. She tries to explain her modern views: ‘Well, you know, we are a family rather...’ and the other character answers: ‘We know, nontraditional...’.

¹ The main video of the campaign can be watched here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMkeos_RQhM.

Some of the print executions of the campaign can be found with a Google Images search, following the key phrase ‘Life has more nuances/Savana’.

² The video that invited people to boycott the Referendum can be watched here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4C6f_HGn338

³ Two relevant confessions of the minds behind the campaign can be read here: <https://www.iqads.ro/articol/39890/toleranta-crescuta-pentru-tot-felul-de-nuante-cristina-avram-savana-si>; <https://www.vice.com/ro/article/bjx7yq/omul-din-spatele-campaniei-publicitare-care-ironizeaza-coalitia-pentru-familie>

Also, when posting the video of the campaign on their Facebook page, the agency mentioned that “3 million people will press the *dislike* button after the most recent Savana campaign, but this can only make us happy” with the hashtag #lifehasmorenuances (in Romanian)¹. The mentioning of the “3 million people” was an allusion to the 3 million signatures that had supported the initiative to change the Constitutional definition of marriage.

Through all these images, the advertising campaign was creating the false impression that the proponents of the Referendum would somehow be against these situations, since they can only imagine a functional family following *conventional* routes. *Conventional* is implicitly defined here as boring, outdated, or unrealistic, adhering to models that are no longer in place in a modern society. *Hermeneutical injustice* is also performed by removing the moral content from the center of the discussion, equating Christian morality with trivial subjects such as the taste for the colors of the wall in one’s home.

The video spot was giving a powerful voice to a *straw man* fallacy issued by the opponents of the Referendum in many of the public debates they had with the supporters of the Referendum. The fallacy had been exposed every time, and lengthy explanations were given about the fact that the modification of the Constitution would only impede homosexual couples from gaining recognition in Romania and would not touch on any of the rights that other types of families have². In face-to-face debates, the other laws that protect other types of families were mentioned, to explain over and over again that marriage between spouses is only one way of forming a family and it is only this issue that constitutes the subject of the Referendum – the gender and the number of those spouses. Logically, the *straw man* that opponents to the Referendum were trying to impose, by repeatedly mentioning single

¹ https://www.facebook.com/PapayaAdvertising/?_tn_=%2Cd%2CP-R&eid=ARDY0w-UrkwTmIS08Dgd6kq8faZNkkkWXiEYjnBv0P6lZeKUgh1ohbGGWKXOvYMRx0YFo-Fxyp1Ur6w

² As an example, here is a debate where the object of the Referendum is clarified to refer only to marriage, which is only one route to the forming of a family: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UY-7TZAvmW8&t=356s>.

The speaker that opposes the Referendum repeatedly raises the problem of single mothers, although the Constitutional modification did not touch on the rights of monoparental families. Her opponent explains that the Romanian law protects these families and other types of families in equal measure, but this has nothing to do with the Constitutional article under discussion.

mothers as being a victim of this modification, was an absurd accusation, since the initial formulation of the Constitutional article, that of the plural *spouses*, would not have included single mothers either. Factually, it was an accusation that was hard to sustain, too. Support for families who adopt had been long-term directions of action of many of the organizations that wanted this change in Constitution on religious bases, among the most prominent being the Romanian pro-life organizations. Their actions in Romania have always been directed to single mothers who are in difficulty and to encouraging adoption (both seen as alternatives to abortion).

Yet, this error of transmission nonetheless affected the image of the initiative. The social media exploded in defending *various nuances of the family in Romania (the straw man)*, with people even confessing directly that they could not support the Referendum because they were single parents. Epistemic injustice, in this case, affected the quality of the information people engaged with.

Advertising has a few features that make it particularly dangerous in these situations of epistemic injustice. One is that its errors of transmission, when identified, can be defended by the light and funny air commercials can have. Who would argue with a clown, who would seriously develop a critical analysis of a joke? Epistemic injustice is thus amplified by the fact that any critical engagement with the content is immediately labeled as excessive, exaggerated and the ‘we have bigger problems’ method of silencing opposition. The other feature is the incidental learning it counts on: because the theme of the traditional family is not foregrounded in these ads, because the ad is about fashionable lime and fashionable choices, the *background information* it transmits about the traditional family does not motivate an open debate. Thus, the rational evaluation of the implicit premises is not activated and people take this *background information* as largely accepted social knowledge.

Case Study 2:

Building a *credibility deficit* by means of advertising

As already mentioned, the same advertising agency produced another video spot, launched a week before the Referendum took place, probably intending to work as a last-minute *counter-frame* of the issue. The argumentative structure of the video was analyzed in another work (Grancea and Grancea 2019, 273-276), but no reference to its epistemic injustice was made there.

In the video, a projected Romania is portrayed, one in which political and religious violence would rule. The action is placed inside a Cathedral that is tainted by political symbols, all alluding to the ruling party in Romania: the three roses on the Cathedral's window are the current symbol of the ruling political party in Romania, while the image of a character that resembles its leader-at-the-time (Liviu Dragnea) is projected on a big screen inside the Cathedral. An aggressive teacher who wears a Nazi-like armband, with the same three roses imprinted on it, is asking her students to honor the memory of the Referendum, when their parents managed to *return* to the *traditional values*, with the help of the political party. Children are then taken to see a person being burnt at the stake, in front of their eyes (alluding to the Medieval Inquisition and the burning of heretics). The final scenes of the video reveal that the burning place was the center of Bucharest, Romania's capital, while on the screen a message appears: "It depends on us what future we prepare for them. If you care, stay home", thus inviting people to boycott the Referendum.

Beyond its obvious exaggerations, that were explained by its creators in terms of 'creative subjectivity'¹, the video contains at least three elements that attempt to create a *credibility deficit* for the Christian view on the issue of homosexual marriage. All of these elements have also been expressed in the debates surrounding the issue, therefore they cannot be relegated to the aforementioned 'artistic subjectivity'.

One is that they are *not really interested* in the issue of homosexual marriage. The political associations purported by the spot support the idea that it is only a matter of political power that the Social Democratic Party wants to regain in Romania. Actually, in the interview I have indicated in the link, Robert Tiderle accuses the Coalition that is behind the initiative of using homosexual marriage only as a convenient 'communication strategy', while its real interests are far from it.

The second direction used to create a *credibility deficit* to the Christians supporting the initiative is by showing children absurdly repeating "Dare to believe, Dare to believe, Dare to believe" while being in the Cathedral, under the attentive watch of the aggressive teacher who points to them the benefits of the return to the traditional family. Here the *hermeneutical injustice* done to Christian practices is obvious and hardly needing any further inquiry.

¹ An interview with the manager of the advertising agency can be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0R2QGIMRnM>
He explains the strategy behind the campaign they did and shares his views on the proponents of the Referendum.

The third manner in which a *credibility deficit* is built for the Christians who would vote YES at the Referendum on religious grounds is that of pointing to past or potential misinterpretations of the Christian faith. Apart from the already mentioned allusions to the Medieval Inquisition, it must be said that the little girls in the video wear the same suits as the women portrayed in the series “The Handmaid’s Tale”, inspired by a novel by Margaret Atwood. Although the series does involve misinterpreted quotations from the Old and the New Testament, Margaret Atwood has insisted on the fact that her dystopia does not portray Christian values in action, but their opposite¹.

However, this distorted image fuels phatic adversity towards Christian groups, by implicitly projecting an ethos of the group that opposes the Referendum as being peaceful, modern, and relaxed towards all forms of diversity, while the group that supports the Referendum as being violent, old-fashioned, and determined to artificially homogenize all personal options of people. For somebody who does not know Christian teaching and real Christian groups, this image may seem quite appealing and easy to buy, especially in a Romania that has been fed with media-packages of different ideas, such as freedom-democracy-sexual liberation-modernity, presented as if they would only come together and as if anyone who did not buy sexual liberation themes is automatically a Communist, a Nazi, an extremist of some kind, a dangerous person for freedom and – most importantly – someone whose views on public morality are not to be taken into consideration. These are clear symptoms of a large-scale *testimonial* injustice done to anyone who dares to have a different approach on public morality.

5. Conclusions

Rhetorical routes to building a *credibility deficit* need to be included in the horizon of current studies on epistemic injustice. The credibility deficit is often seen as endemic to a system or a community, as something that is somehow there already and we must take measures against its operation on our reception mechanisms. But attacks in public discourse aimed at a social group can also be a source of *contextual*

¹ An interview with Margaret Atwood on her novel:
<https://annaczarnikneimeyer.wordpress.com/2017/05/02/i-asked-margaret-atwood-about-religion-and-this-is-what-she-said/>

credibility deficit. Advertising shortcuts are especially apt in making such attacks under the guise of irony or amusement related to some assumed background knowledge about social groups, thus discouraging further exploration of the topic and misinforming public opinion, while indirectly leading to a *credibility deficit* of the respective groups on epistemically irrelevant grounds.

The incidental learning processes that explain advertising's silent influence in what concerns social knowledge should constitute a serious reason for advertising practitioners and regulators to reconsider the attention that must be given to its representational content. This content should not be judged only on vaguely defined criteria of *acceptability* or *political correctness*, but should also be evaluated within the framework of epistemic (in)justice.

Although advertising is never alone as a source of social knowledge, the damaging effects it can have on the mutual understanding between social groups cannot be reduced to its *echoing* function. It is precisely because certain misunderstandings between groups and gaps in mutual knowledge are prevalent in society, advertising should avoid capitalizing on them and thus further amplifying them.

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