

# The Application of Ethical Theories to Analyse the Marketing Practice of Advertising

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## **Abstract**

*Advertising is the most widely known weapon in the marketing armoury, the average Australian adult views around 3000 advertisements per day through variety of mediums, such as radio, television or direct mail. It extremely affects all of us throughout lives and the essential ethical issues raised in advertising industry are that advertisements should be legal, honest and truthful. Due to the effect of advertising such as stereotyping which has on the customers, there are some arguments that some advertisings are not ethical to the customers. This paper will discuss some ethical theories and then use these theories to analysing if some advertisings are ethical.*

## **Keywords**

*advertising, ethical issues, stereotyping, ethical theories*

## **1. Introduction**

Marketing system is efficient if there is voluntary exchange exists between buyers and corporations that is they are mutually beneficial. Holley indicates three important parameters in voluntary exchange: knowledge, non-compulsion and rationality. Since the perfect competition conditions cannot meet, Holley' acceptable exchange model states that it is ethically justifiable when buyers are adequately informed, adequately rational and free from compulsion. Because the function of advertising is to inform the public the availability of a particular product and try to persuade the public to buy that product, a lot of people question the ethics of values presented and the effect advertising has on consumers.

Galbrith argues that it is unethical to create desires and wants that previously did not exist. Individual's needs must be original with himself, and above all their satisfaction must not be contrived by the production process (Galbrith, 1998, p. 127).

It is also ethically inappropriate when advertising prevent informed choice and it is manipulative instead of persuading our choice. The major difference between manipulation and persuasion is that manipulative information involves deception, persuasion is not (Beauchamp, Bowie, & Arnold, 2009).

## 2. Marketing Practice of Advertising

There are also ethical concerns regarding its marketing practices, such as stereotyping. Since television advertisements have a strict time limit around 30 seconds, advertiser has to create all the values and commence a relationship with a consumer within that time limit to achieve a goal of creating a desire. Hence, stereotypes can be adopted to fill the gaps it would take to long explaining. Spence and Van Heekeren (2005) suggested stereotypes are a form of shorthand, which groups individuals with shared characteristics into one standardized and simplified label, like mother. It is a basic strategy used by business to divide the market and targeting a particular group based on an assumption about their actions, thoughts or beliefs of a small sample from within that population. Afterward, commoditization is created for these types of consumers. It denotes to the creation of a set of beliefs about a particular group that previously did not exist or not thought relevant to all in the group in order to communicate a message (Spence & Van Heekeren, 2005).

Even though the use of stereotypes is fairly common in advertising that does not necessarily mean it is ethically justifiable. It treats people as their economic advantage rather than their ends, which violates Kantian deontological point of view and may therefore be morally objectionable. On the other hand, under the concept of utilitarianism, it is ethically justifiable if the benefits of providing valuable information outweigh the cost of treating people as a means to it.

## 3. Overview of Relevant Ethical Theories

Stereotyping in advertising involves presenting a group of people in an unvarying pattern that lacks individuality. It often reflects popular misconceptions and involves a misrepresentation of the group of people stereotyped. As stereotyping is unavoidable in advertising, so Advertising has a responsibility to avoid the creation of negative stereotypes and the perpetuation of existing negative stereotypes. The ethical problem with stereotyping in advertising, however, arises either because insofar as stereotyping is a misrepresentation of reality, it is a form of deception, or because the use of stereotypes in advertising harms the people who are being stereotyped, and that act is also morally wrong. Where it may belittle people as individuals and do them harm because it damages their self-esteem, such as the non-thin young woman, where it omits other types of people and therefore reinforces underrepresentation (Spence & Van Heekeren, 2005).

John Bishop states image advertising uses an image of an idealised person-type who is usually portrayed as a user of the product and invite the potential consumer to identify themselves. Analysis of ethical nature of image advertisements is based around four core criteria; firstly, did the ad make false or misleading promises. False promises include like the advertising works by making the belief that if they use the product they will be just like the model with regard to the relevant characteristic. Moreover, did the ad promote false values, such as, the advertising support presuppositions (the slim is beautiful). Furthermore, the ad may be deemed harmful and threaten the autonomy of the individual. Autonomy of choice regards exposure to advertisements, acceptance of symbols, and acceptance of images as role

model. Autonomy of desire is capacity to resist irrational or unwanted desires.

#### **4. Identification of Relevant Examples & Explanations**

##### *4.1 Unrealistic Body Image Issue (Spence & Van Heckeran)*

Using Dior products does not make anyone more beautiful, so it was misleading promise for women, and it also provides false values that beauty is no wrinkles and the overemphasis on an attractive body. In addition, the use of thin and perfect-skinned models in ads has been greatly criticized for its impact on women's self-image. The use of such models achieve the advertiser's objectives of gaining attention, appealing to aspirations, and dramatizing the benefits of products. The side effects are the creation of potentially harmful stereotypes. Girls compare their physical appearance with that of the models, may contribute to eating disorders. And it also Create a culture depicting the need and necessity of high quality products and brands over average products, thus limiting a consumer's choice.

##### *4.2 Sexual Object (John Bishop)*

Women posing as decorative objects may activate the beliefs that women are seductive and frivolous sex objects. But not all the women like that, and it also degrading women, promoting them as seductive objects. So it is proving that it was misrepresentation of reality and deemed harmful. It also damages the most viewer's self-esteem, because not all the women comfortable with the way she looks or satisfied with her body, she may develop an inferiority complex. The advertisement only shows a small proportion of women who are 'blessed' with such looks, alienating the rest of the women population where it omits other types of people and therefore reinforces under representation.

##### *4.3 Domestic Gender*

Spence and Van Heckeran corroborate that historic depiction of women's solely domestic work responsibility is a misrepresentation of reality. There is an increasing trend of women in the workforce, particular in the advertising industry. Besides, both men and women in family have equal responsibilities to do domestic work.

They further argue that this misrepresentation can be deemed harmful for women as they mostly perceived as dependent, unintelligent consumers of products, and they are incapable of out-of-the-home occupations. Obviously, this it is belittling causing harm through damaged self-esteem. Finally, it omits women's independent and working ability in today's culture, which lead to under representation.

##### *4.4 Racial*

In early stereotypes, African black people were usually depicted as primitive, childlike, cannibalistic persons who live in tribes, carry spears, believe in witchcraft and worship their wizard. A typical example of this image is Tintin in the Congo. When white people are caught by African tribes they will put in a large cauldron so they can be cooked and eaten. Obviously, there is a misrepresentation about the reality of African culture that stereotypes all black people are savage tribes who love to eat people. This is deemed as possibly being harmful not only through an attack on self esteem but also societal perceptions of all African people being incorrect. Also, such story was regarded by many respondents

as a medium via which racism could be reinforced, for example, by presence of ethnic minority participants and by the ways they were portrayed on the TV screen. (Spence & Van Heekeren, 2005).

#### 4.5 Age

Stereotypes are often culturally shared and institutionalized negative images which are used to justify unequal treatment, of discrimination, directed against minority group. The term ageism which refers to a deep prejudice against the elderly occurs when people stereotype others depend on old age. It appears throughout society in varying degrees, in television, advertising, movies, and jobs. One common damaging stereotype, “infantilization”, reduces old people to the status of children, who lack moral, intellectual, or physical maturity. According to the investigation of Tuckman and Lorge (1953), most graduate students in psychology agreed that old people are unproductive, have to go to bed early, need a nap every day, cannot manage their own affairs, and are in their second childhood. As a result of the stereotype that older people are useless, older people’s self-esteem and behaviors will be affected. They may feel like dependent, non-contributing member of society, and perform worse on measures of competence and memory. These stereotypes then become self-fulfilling prophecies.

### 5. Identification of Possible Courses of Action

Depending on these cases of negative stereotyping, it may cause harm and treat people as means and may therefore be morally objectionable. Hence, there are some possible courses of actions worked out to reform current advertising industry.

- 1) A total ban all advertisements that portray the slightest form of stereotyping;
- 2) Disclaimers at the bottom of the commercials;
- 3) Regulate the diversification of stereotypes within advertisements;
- 4) Create a universal plan for advertisers to follow when creating an ad to ensure they create non-harmful ads;
- 5) Diversification of the advertising standards board members to ensure appropriateness of ads from a number of perspectives.

### 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, stereotyping, though essential, is inherently ethically problematic. To avoid creating further serious argument, it must be used with extreme care so that people’s dignity is not compromised just for promotions means. Besides, all advertisers should follow the latest requirements and guidelines and make sure that all ethnic groups’ interest is being concerned. Finally, advertisement designer should portray people as equally competent, avoiding using impressive and derogatory words.

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