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Advertising and Ethical Theories – A Comparative Study of Select Campaigns

¹Sudeep Limaye, ²Dr. Milind Pande

¹Research Student, Dr. D.Y. Patil Vidyapeeth, Pune, Maharashtra, India,

E-mail: sudeeplimaye@yahoo.com

²Project Director, MIT Group of Institutes, Pune, Maharashtra, India,

E mail: milindpande@mitpune.com

Abstract –

In business it is an accepted fact that the purpose of business is to make profits. At functional level the decisions are about what is right and wrong.

Marketing and advertising both reflect and shape cultural values and norms. Through this paper an attempt is made to understand if there is any ethical dimension in the advertising or marketing communication.

Some select advertisements of TV and print are taken as sample for study from the different ethical perspectives. The authors have taken the liberty of adding their views on the same.

The paper highlights that there is no ethical norm followed by marketer other than the profit motive. While the paper also acknowledges that the job of marketing promotion is to sell the product and strict guidelines or law would drive the creativity away from advertising and promotion. But allowing a free run would harm the consumers, competitors, and society.

The authors believe that an ethical framework and a very tight control and monitoring mechanism for unethical marketing promotion are the key to success in Indian situation.

Keywords: Advertising, Ethics, is there ethics in advertising and promotion.

Introduction

In the modern management and business environment it is an accepted fact that the purpose of business is to make profits. The only addition that is made to the concept is to broaden the scope of profit to all the stake holders rather than the business alone.

Business and management at functional level is all about taking decisions. Decisions are about the

best course of action for the organisation. The decisions are about what is right and wrong, what is good and what is bad for the interest of the organisation.

The decisions are needed to be communicated to the customers. This is done in form of marketing communication. The communication in marketing terms can also be defined as, done with the objectives of informing, reminding and

persuading the prospective customers to buy and patronise the business.

The idea of promotion is to generate consumer's acceptance of the product being advertised. In order to achieve that marketer's, try a variety of advertising approaches. Research has concluded that there are seven main ones; fear, humour, sex, music, rationality, emotions and scarcity. Advertisers use one or combine several of these appeals to ensure that their targeted audiences receive their message favourably. (Clow & Baack,2007). (May Abd El Latif El Hattab 2008)

The idea is to be become popular and generate recall. Yet popularity does not come easy and cheap.

It is said that advertising reflects and shape cultural values and norms. People rely on advertising to get knowledge about products or a service, in fact advertising has become an educator.

This creates a responsibility for the advertiser and advertising to tell the truth to consumer who is seeking knowledge.

In the process of advertising how far can this persuasion go before it crosses the line to become unethical?

How far can the use of sex go on as a persuasive tool in advertising?

Is it ethical to use children is promoting products?

What about advertising to children who do not have the required maturity to make truly rational decisions?

Is it correct to play on people's fears and uncertainties as a form of communication for peddling product?

How big or important is the role of culture in advertising and defining ethical values and moral standards.

Literature review :

According to Robert Bartels in his article "*A Model for Ethics in Marketing*", the ethics of truthfulness in an advertisement is premised upon what the audience knows or expects. The advertiser is expected neither to take advantage of ignorance in a viewer, nor to fall short of a customer's expectation of "truthful information".

The concept of act utilitarianism says that action should be for providing maximum good for maximum people and if a negligible minority of audience of the promotion fails to understand the non-truth element in advertising. This would be permitted. As ultimately the greatest satisfaction is still being provided for the greatest number, and the damage is negligible.

John Rawls, a noted Harward university professor did not agree with the utilitarian approach. He propounded the *A Theory of Justice* (1971).

The theory is centered on two fundamental principles of justice which ensure a morally acceptable society. He believed in the concept of social contract.

The principles are,

1.Liberty principle – Right of every one to have basic liberty compatible to with liberty of others.

2.Justice principle – social and economic positions are to be,

a.-To every one's advantage

b.-Open to all

Milton Friedman is seen as a campaigner of free market with minimum government interference. As per Friedman the company has responsibility towards the shareholder and has no responsibility towards welfare of the society at large. For Friedman, rules of the business towards society involve obeying the law & ethical custom only (no fraud or deception).

Data and Methodology:

Throughout this paper an attempt is made to understand if there is any ethical dimension in the advertising or marketing promotion by looking at some of the popular TV and newspaper advertisements as seen in Indian market from the different ethical perspectives. The authors have taken the liberty of adding their views on the same also along with the perspectives as given by different schools of thoughts.

Four cases of advertisements are taken as case study and they are analysed from different perspectives of ethics as given by Emanuel Kant, Milton Friedman, Rawl's principle of justice and an author's view.

Empirical results and discussion

CASE 1 - Axe Deoderent Asdvertisement



Cashing on Humour

A Kantian Perspective:

As per the Kantian ethics theory, people are ethical if they are motivated by a moral obligation as identified by a set of universally acceptable laws. The principle of the Categorical Imperative does not allow any exceptions to an established moral rule. An example of a categorical imperative is "Do not lie." As per the Kantian school of thought on dealing with the business obligation to the truth, the businesses are to tell the truth and anything less than the truth would be a morally wrong. By that logic this advertisement is clearly a "non-truth", and is unacceptable. But this advertisement could be seen by people as being humorous and creative.

The application of this Kant's theory to advertising would be resisted by the advertising community and marketers. We have commented on this issue in the conclusion.

A Utilitarian Perspective:

Utilitarian school of thoughts are consequentialist. As per this school of thought, actions are moral or immoral based on the overall measure of human welfare or loss. And as per the utilitarian perspective, falsehood in advertisements is morally permissible if the outcome result in greater overall happiness. The philosophy being "Maximum good for maximum people".

So this advertisement may be accepted by most of the people as a humorous way of selling a product which creates more overall happiness in the masses. However, a word of caution here is that such clear and obvious deception is expected to be rejected by consumers at large. Also there is a

strong possibility of encouragement to lying in advertisements which is definitely a cause of concern.

Author's perspective:

The marketers have an obligation to consumers' psychological and emotional Well-being. The businesses based on ethics should be concerned not just with its self-interest but also with its potential effects on its target consumers. To remove possible deception and telling the truth the business will have to know the needs, wants, and interests of their consumers so as to deliver satisfaction and value. In the authors view the advertisement is not conforming to the ethics of business or advertising.

CASE 2 - Case Study: Slice ad showing Katrina Kaif and Amul Macho advertisement

Cashing on need for intimacy and passion



The slice ad features model in a sensual mood eating a mango while posing provocatively. While in the amul macho innerwear ad the model is shown washing cloths and is seen as visualising the person in it. The focus of the ad was clear-cut

with the camera emphasising models seductive looks. It is only much later in the ad that actual product is introduced.

A Kantian Perspective:

The ad had an obvious sexual tone. The ad was clearly aimed at people who desired romance, sex and intimacy. As per the Kant's duty of ethics, the ad is created based on their self-interest of maximising profit and increasing product viewership and usage. The aim is to exploit the inner wants and needs of consumers and they act as a distraction from the product itself. The profit maximisation objective would be met irrespective of the quality or type of the product being advertised. This is against Kant's ethics where one must act from a moral duty instead of his inclinations or interest.

A Milton Friedman Perspective:

The business of business is to maximise profits. Similarly, the business of advertisers is to maximise viewership. As the use of sex appeal has proven to be very useful and effective in drawing attention, Friedman school of thought would argue that the use of sex appeal through a celebrity icon like Katrina kaif is just the use of an effective marketing strategy. Therefore, as per the Friedman perspective there is nothing ethically wrong about it.

Author's View:

There is nothing legally wrong with having sexual connotations in ads if it is for products with strong association with sensuality and that the features of

these products can only be brought out through use of sex. However, it is wrong when sensuality is used to advertise daily consumer products such as a mango juice and male innerwear. In such a scenario sex advertising will lead to immorality and products would get sold only by exploiting the inner desires and needs of the consumers. The idea of using a woman's or a man's body to draw the attention of the opposite sex is inherently wrong as per the Kantian school of thought. The Kantian philosophy says that humans should not be treated as means but as ends. In addition, one must see that under community virtue in business ethics, the business is a member of a larger community and has a duty towards the choice of methods being used and portrayed in its ads. This is also related to the aspect of stereotyping in the society.

CASE 3:Case Study: MacDonald Ad

Cashing on one's inability to make rational decisions



The ad depicts that a small girl asking the boy if the girl friends are bad and the boy replies by saying girls are very demanding. But when he realises that the girl is only asking for a McAloo tikki he immediately takes his pocket money in getting one. The ad ends with the girl kissing the boy and the boy saying I am lovin it.

A Kantian Perspective:

The act of trying to make children believe that having a MacDonald's burger from a friend is indicative of their love and care, and that it will draw approval from others is an act of exploiting the innocence and simplicity of children. The ad uses the innocence of child as a means for MacDonald to attract the children who are a major consumer of food items and influencer in such purchase decisions by consumers who have the purchasing power. The ad uses children to increase their profits. In this ad the children are being used as means to achieving profit maximising objectives. Such an act is unethical.

A Utilitarian Perspective:

A utilitarian would argue that whether the act is right or wrong depends on the actual consequences the act resulting in an action by the consumer. In this case, advertisers are aware that children lack the full of understanding of the commercial world and are unable to make rational decisions. As such, the decision to persuade kids into buying MacDonald's is done so without proper and rational thinking. Such messages that talk to children only at their level of actual development are wrong as it is the exploitation of the innocence and simplicity of the children's mind.

A Milton Friedman View:

Same as the utilitarian view, Milton Friedman's view is that the marketer's job is to make profits and to achieve that maximum awareness and usage has to be created. As children have a very

high influence a child has on the adult's purchases for food related items, especially in fast food industry, it can be safely said that it is advised to focus on children for advertising.

Specifically, in the highly competitive fast food industry children are a major consumers and also influencers. So the children cannot be ignored by marketers. In such a case advertisement featuring or using children are a norm. This logically means advertisements targeted to children and that use their basic social needs such as love and concern and friendship would be the natural course of action to get a response from them. All this would result in children and parents buying the products. This would finally lead to better and market share and revenue for MacDonal'd's.

Author's view:

As per the ethics of care, special care has to be given to children who are vulnerable to influences since they are still in their early stage of development. So a framework that combines Kantian and Utilitarian ethics is necessary to ensure that children will not suffer any possible negative consequences. As per Milton Friedman standpoint the marketers are merely communicating to their target consumers and it is necessary for them to focus on the way the message is being communicated to the consumer. Advertisements that are used to exploit the inability of the child to make the rational decision are unethical.

CASE 4 - Case Study: India's Fair and Handsome and Fair and lovely Skin-Whitening Ad

Racial Discrimination



In the fair and lovely ad elderly father is shown in a sad mood telling his dark-skinned daughter as how he does not have a son to provide for him. The daughter along with father is shown going to apply for a job of an air hostess. At the job place the girl is turned away by the receptionist who makes crude remarks on her skin colour.

The father returns home in a sad mood and is shown going in to a secret room. There he creates a cream which turns the daughter's skin fair. The girl goes back to the airline office and the same receptionist is shown staring at her with her mouth open in shock. Ad shows that an executive who happens to walk past hires her on the spot.

The girl's fortunes are changed and she becomes immensely popular (and fair!!) and makes her father happy.

A Kantian Perspective:

This ad understandably targets on the society's stereotype of dark-skinned people as inferior to fair-skinned ones. It further reinforces the belief that to be successful you have to change your skin colour (preferably with Fair and Lovely). Should business be allowed to make use of societal stereotypes to sell their products?

A Kantian view would be to think about how dark-skinned Indians would react to this. If dark-skinned Indians are made to feel inferior as an effect of increased sales of Fair and Lovely, then it should not be done. Would fair-skinned Indians feel good if some other race negatively stereotyped them? Also the Kantian philosophy would never favour use of a person's physical attributes (in this case, the skin colour) as a method to sell more Fair and Lovely cream.

However noble the advertiser's intentions of educating the consumer might be, the advertisers are still enforcing the stereotype of the group that being dark-skinned is inferior. By doing so the advertisers are ignoring and making consumers ignore the uniqueness of each individual. This is morally unethical.

Rawl's Principles of Justice:

One could argue that the ad was only reflecting existing societal norms in India. In India most people believe that being fair-skin has a better chance of success in life. By that logic there is nothing wrong in creating an ad that Indians accept as true. The ad is simply showing what society believes. Such stereotype normally would lead to inequality of opportunity for dark-skin

colour people. This is not as per the Rawl's second Principle of Justice, which supports fair equality of opportunity so that every person can explore and exploit their full capacities. Although culture plays an important role but in such cases the basic right of a person has to take precedence to culture.

Author's View:

Such a stereotype does exist in India still exploiting this by creating an advertisement is a major ethical issue. This is a universally accepted fact that that people should not be judged based on their skin colour. Every advertiser has an obligation to society and culture. The obligation has to be based on the culture of the ad's targeted audience. We can avoid such instances of social or cultural beliefs being exploited by advocating use of Rawl's ethical framework. The framework advocates for fair equality of opportunity for every person regardless of their physical attributes.

Summary and Conclusions:

Human beings are unique but we succeed best in groups and not in insolation. The various moral and ethical frameworks also embody this. For example, Rawl's Theory of Justice and Fairness gives importance to an individual through the principle of compensatory justice. As per the theory if a person is aggrieved in some way the person should be brought back to his or her original position before the wrongdoing happened. Indian culture and ethics also lay a great emphasis on the importance of duties and relationships to other human beings.

The problem is when advertising target the consumer as a group thereby undermining the uniqueness of each individual. In the case of the fair and lovely ad the message is to have fair skin to be successful in life, since this is what society believes. It degrades the uniqueness of any individual especially women with dark skin. The ad sets a benchmark of fair skin as a route to success thereby making dark-skinned females undesirable and with a need for improvement.

Advertising also tends to treat people as objects. The human bodies are used as a platform to advertise products from soaps to jewellery to cars. This is against the Kantian categorical imperative that disallows using people as a means to an end, which for business is increased sales for that particular product or service. These objects are portrayed as an idealised state. It has been seen that this has led to situations of young girls growing up with self-image problems as they invariably compare their own imperfect bodies to the models shown in ads. “The size Zero syndrome”. Teenage boys believe that to be manly, one must have a measure of cold-bloodedness to be a grown up man. Something that ads like Thumsup of Bajaj motorcycles show. There is a school of thought that says that there has to be very clear regulation and guidelines to control the advertising in particular and entire marketing promotion in general. So as to prevent the manipulation, exploitation, or degradation of both customers and competitors.

Advertising or marketing promotion as a whole is ultimately focused on making consumer's forget

the “needs” and define “want” as the advertised products only.

The parameters of ethicality for any marketing promotion to be ethical are not clearly defined.

One actually finds it difficult to find ethics in promotion as a whole. Rather what one gets to see is justification from different ethical or moral perspectives for the acts already done in form of the advertisement or promotion.

However, it is also true that a set of strict guidelines or law would actually drive the advertising and promotion industry away from the creativity and colourful ads towards a more descriptive process.

But to allowing marketers free run without any ethical or moral standard would harm the consumers, competitors, and society at large.

The authors believe that it is difficult to have clearly spelt out regulations and thus they cannot be the solution, rather a predetermined ethical framework and a very tight control and monitoring mechanism of self-regulation for unethical marketing promotion could be the key to success in Indian situation. Solution is self-regulation with strong deterrents built in in to the process. If we are to take the whole promotion as a process the suggestion is to build in checks at the input stage itself so as to ensure that if the input is right the end is expected to be right.

The authors also feel that a detailed study for consumer's perception on ethical issues in marketing promotion is required.

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