ADVERTISING ETHICS: A REVIEW

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to give an underlying perspective on the current scenario in the advertising industry. It covers the core issue of ethics in advertising ranging from the issue of unethical advertising, deceptions, advertisements targeting children, the exploitation of sex and gender, and also the issues of subliminal advertising. At the end of this article, the author presented a fresh look on the issue of advertising ethics through the theological interpretation.

Key Words: Advertising ethics, ethics, unethical advertising.

INTRODUCTION

Advertising is one of the most integral parts of a business entity. Organizations all around the world spend billions of dollars every year to promote their products and advertising is one of the tools to promote their product globally. As businesses transcend across border, the role and magnitude of advertising expenditure have expanded thus require a close examination in terms of its roles and functions. The introduction of new technologies has set a new playing field in which advertisers have to be up-to-date with new media such as advertising through web sites and also through mobile phones. According to the Global Advertising Industry Profile, the global advertising market is forecasted to have a value of 90.4 billion dollar in 2011, an increase of 28% since 2006 (Datamonitor Plc, Oct 2007).

Wells et al., Cannon, and Kotler et al. (2006, p. 5; 1973, p. 11; 1999, p. 674) define modern advertising as "a paid persuasive communication that uses non-personal mass media-as well as other forms of interactive communication-to reach broad audiences to connect an identified sponsor with a target audience". The definition is with the exception of advertisements that appear in the forms of

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public service announcements in which the ad space is donated or allocated without any expense by the media. This is a shift from the old perception of advertisements in which they come in the forms of public announcers in the market, sandwich boards, flyers and other methods which are largely done by the proprietors themselves and these advertisements were sometime free of charge. Belch and Belch (2004, p. 16) further enhanced the definition by adding that the persuasive communication is conducted to promote an organization, product, service, or an idea.

In the ancient days, human used to be self-sufficient. In other words, the plant or hunt for their food. Furthermore, they will try to find or make things that can satisfy their basic needs. As time goes by, their self-sufficient production began to show signs of surplus and sometime this surplus cannot fulfill other necessities. Incidentally, they have to turn to trading to fulfill their needs and to cash in their production surplus. They began to realize that in trading, they have to compete with other individuals with the same products, and thus advertising takes its first peek into the world.

All the developments and changes in advertising do not come without a price. Some scholars argue that advertising can prop up ethical issues (Drumwright, 1993; Indrayana, 2004; Tinarbuko, 2002; Kunkel, Wilcox, Cantor, Palmer, Linn, & Dowrick, 2004; Aitchison, 2002; Tanudjaja, 2002). These ethical issues include women exploitation, subliminal perception, advertising to children, deceptive advertising, and other issues which can lead to moral deterioration of the society (Shabbir & Thwaites, 2007; Murphy, 1998; Blair, Stephenson, Hill, & Green, 2006). The fact that potentially unethical advertisements are reaching the marketplace suggested that current methods of evaluating advertisements may be insufficient for some of today's controversial or innovative campaigns (Bush & Bush, 1994).

Ethics is one of the branches of philosophy (Zubair, 1987). According to Spence and Heekeren (2005, p. 2), ethics can be define as "a set of prescriptive rules, principles, values, and virtues of character that inform and guide

interpersonal and intrapersonal conduct". Schlegelmilch (1998, pp. 6-7) further argues that ethics is hard to define due to the fact that it cannot be directly measured and it originates from many influences such as internal and external environmental influences. Dr H. Hamzah Ya'qub (1985, p. 13) in his book, Etika Islam: Pembinaan Akhlaqulkarimah, perceives ethics as a body of knowledge that examines good and bad/right and wrong by observing human behaviors.

There are extensive researches done on business ethics in general (De George, 1987; Tsalikis & Seaton, 2007; Sabrin, 2002). Researches in business ethics covers all the functions of business thus it also covers the area of advertising and promotion. Due to the fact that advertising stirs ethical controversies, numerous studies from different perspectives have been done to understand this phenomenon (Nebenzahl & Jaffe, 1998; Fam, Waller, & Erdogan, 2004; Waller & Kam, 2000).

DECEPTIVE ADVERTISING

Advertising has always raised a lot of criticism from the public and numerous studies have been done mostly on the areas of impact of unethical advertising towards consumers. Studies have shown that the consumers believe advertising often violates broad ethical norms (Treise, Weigold, Conna, & Garrison, 1994). Some individuals might argue that the issue of advertising ethics is an oxymoron (Beltramini, 1999). Deception is defined as a false or misleading claim in advertising (Hyman M. , 1990). According to Armstrong, Gurol and Russ (1979), there are three important components of salient deception such as belief, falsity and relevance. From a deontological perspective, an advertising claim is potentially deceptive if it can be shown to encourage mistaken actions by consumers. An advertisement is considered to be misleading or deceptive only if it is reasonable to expect that persons exposed to it, or those targeted by it, would come to hold false beliefs as a result of exposure to it (Attas, 1999). It is argued that deceptive advertising can be shown to be morally objectionable, on the relatively weak assumption that it is evidently wrong to harm others (Carson, Wakutch, & Cox, 1985).

The ethicality of advertising may be determined by the extent to which it harms consumers and they can be defined as (1) violation of autonomy by control or manipulation, (2) invasion of privacy, and (3) the violation of the right to know (Nebenzahl & Jaffe, 1998). Spence and Heekeren argue that the advertising ethics model can be simplified as the role of advertising determines the roles of morality of advertising which is constrained by the universal public morality (Spence & Heekeren, 2005). Snyder (2003) divides the definition of advertising ethics into three components; truth, fairness, and taste and decency. Nor Azam suggested that advertisements should be truthful to the consumers (Shairi, 2001).

Deception in advertising such as price misleading advertising can generate negative consumer reactions in terms of attitude and intention and these are highlighted with the presence of suspicion (Romani, 2006). Jacoby and Hoyer argue that people cannot always assume that an advertisement is misleading because there is evidence that the viewer or reader does not understand a particular claim and this is due to miscomprehension and not deceptive advertising (Jacoby & Hoyer, 1990). In the article, The Lowest Moment in Advertising, the author argues that the most offensive and the most tasteless advertisements in the 90s ranges from being sexually explicit in nature up until being insensitive to some parts of the society especially the minorities (Anonymous, 2003).

Some scholars view advertising as fortifying materialism, selfishness, anxiety, sexual pre-occupation and loss of self-respect (Pollay, 1986). Michael R. Hyman, Richard Tansey, and James W. Clark (1994) wrote an article on the evolution and progress of researches on advertising ethics and the found out that advertising ethics is still a mainstream topic and it is not an exhausted topic. They suggested that more researches should be done on topics such as tobacco advertising and also proposed new researches on scales to measure advertisements ethicality. On the other side of the coin, Edward Spence and Brett Van Heekeren's book on advertising ethics focuses on identifying, examining, and evaluating ethical issues that arise in planning and execution of the

advertising process (Spence & Heekeren, 2005). Their methods of understanding and studying advertising ethics are focused on the advertising processes.

In order to identify misleading and deceitful advertising, Russo, Metcalf and Stephens suggested three alternative views such as fraud, falsity and misleadingness because they are parallel to the three components of advertising communication; the advertiser, the message, and the consumer beliefs about the advertised product (Russo, Metcalf, & Stephens, 1981). Misleading advertisements can always be seen during the festive seasons where retailers and marketers will offer numerous bargains. This will somehow affect honest retailers in which customers will be very cautious towards their claim of bargain (Agee, 2006). One perfect example is the airline industry. The industry itself is a very capital intensive industry and considered to be one of the most competitive industries.

During holidays or the festive seasons, airline companies compete with each other to offer the "cheapest" way to fly. In New Zealand, Qantas was fined NZD380, 000 because the customers have to pay more than the advertised price because there were lots of hidden costs not being mentioned by the airline in the advertisements (Reed Business Information, 2006). Misleading advertising will become more dangerous if it can affect the life and well being of the potential customers. A study was done on 109 prescription drugs advertisements published in major medical journals in early 1990 and found out that most of these advertisements contained misleading information (Kessler, 1992). One method to help reduce the affect of deceptive advertising is through corrective advertising. However, the application of corrective advertising has raised a few concerns such as the rationality, efficiency and probable side effects (Armstrong, Gurol, & Russ, Corrective Advertising: A Review and Evaluation, 1983).

Another study focuses on the practitioners' response based on classical theory affirms that the reason for the industry to struggle in terms of public perceptions on its ethics and credibility is due to lack of emphasis on deontological ethics (Pratt & James, 1994). The approach taken by the researchers in the study was to understand which classical theory[1] being used by advertising practitioners in their reactions towards advertising ethics in general. Zinkhan, on the other hand, suggested that in order to understand advertising ethics, researchers have to identify advertising practices which are potentially damaging to the society (Zinkhan, 1994).

Maria Cecilia Countinho de Arruda and Marcelo Leme de Arruda conducted a study with a purpose is to persuade the individuals involved in the advertising industry to mediate about the values embedded in the campaigns they developed, guiding them towards the universal goal, helping them to find a wise and prudent way of acting (Arruda & Arruda, 1999). Another study was done by Hackley with the objective to explore how ethics in and of advertising may be subject to examination within a broadly social constructionist perspective (Hackley, 1999). The social constructionist movement in social psychology has developed into a wide range of research methods and approaches. One of the features under social constructionist is its mutualist theory of meaning (Still, 1992).

A study done by Frazer emphasizes on the importance of educators to instill advertising ethics in the students (Frazer, 1979). This is because one of the paths that the advertising major students have after graduation is to work with advertising agencies or advertising related organizations. A research done by Drumwright and Murphy (2004), found that advertising practitioners rarely talk about ethics or in other words they are suffering from "moral Myopia". This condition is frightening because advertising practitioners are the ones who are responsible to initiate, shape, and execute the advertising scenario in the society. This phenomenon is supported by a study done by Davis (1994) in which he did a survey on 206 advertising professionals and found out that ethics play a relatively minor role in their decision making processes.

Another study on the ethical frameworks of advertising and marketing research practitioners found out that there is very little difference in

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[1] (i.e. deontological or teleological ethical theories)

the moral reasoning skills between the practitioners and the general public (Castleberry, French, & Carlin, 1993). In a case study done by David Krueger (1998), it is evident that the agencies involved in the study believe that ethical considerations will surface in the advertisements they produce and their relationship with clients. In other words, the advertisements will reflect the ethical orientation of the advertising agencies involved in producing them. One of the most interesting studies on evaluating the advertising practitioners' moral assessment towards advertising content resulted in perception among them that the use of sexual appeals in advertising is moral but should be used in certain circumstances (Maciejewski, 2005). In a study done by Krugman and Ferrell (1981) to assess the level of ethics employed by advertising practitioners compared to their peers and superiors, it is evident that the respondents believed that their ethical standards are higher than their peers but lower compared to their top management in the agencies involved. This result somehow gives an assurance to the public that these practitioners at least acknowledge the existence of ethical standards in their organization.

ADVERTISING TO CHILDREN

Even though legislation and enforcement are being engaged in monitoring the advertising industry, no one can jump into conclusion by solely blaming the industry for its wrong doing. The depiction of nutrition and obesity in television and advertisements has negatively affected food consumption habits in children (Schmitt, Wagner, & Kirch, 2007). A good example to illustrate this issue is the case of fast food advertising in Malaysia. The public and the authorities are enraged with the issue of obesity and unhealthy eating habits among teenagers and pre-pubescent children. They focus the blame entirely on the advertising sponsorship of children television programs during the weekends. The debate was so intense until it reaches the parliament. Starting from that point, the issue has become ambiguously politicized until the major parties that should be blamed were shifted from the manufacturers and

producers of fast food and junk food to the advertisers themselves.

Mohammad argues that in dealing with the phenomenon, the stakeholders in this case, i.e. the public and the government authorities should not put the blame entirely to the advertising industries (Nooh, 2007). The burden of handling this crisis should be shared by the manufacturers and producers of fast food and junk food. In an experiment to understand the effect of food advertisement impact on children's taste preferences shows that children between the ages of 3 to 5 years prefer food and beverages in packaging with brand on it even though the same food was served in packaging without brand (Child Health Alert, Inc., 2007). This clearly shows how advertising can influence children even at an early age. As the media landscape children face has diversified, the lines between advertising and entertainment have become increasingly blurred (Moore, 2004). Children watch a great deal more than television programs created specifically for their age group thus they are more exposed to advertising content that are suited for the adults (O'Sullivan, 2005).Due the changes in technology, advertising has transcended through various medium from print, radio, television and up until now; the web advertisements. Advertising on kid-based Web sites has become a rapidly growing market for companies and a concern for parents (Austin & Reed, 1999). A study by Mittal (1994) on public assessment of TV advertising shows that at least 90 percent of the respondents believe that TV advertisements take undue advantage of children and lead children to make unreasonable purchase demands on parents.

Furthermore, children are more exposed to violent actions by commercials promoting upcoming programs than by the television programs or any other commercial due to the fact that these commercial focus on the essence of events or sequences in the programming that contain violent scenes in order to attract more viewer (Violent Commercials in Television Programs for Children, 2003). Even though there are positive and negative arguments for and against advertising to children, it remains an economic necessity which is in need of continuous readjustments and regulations

(Preston, 2004). Armstrong and Brucks (1988) suggested for the creation of a regulatory or self-regulatory organization where every stakeholders involved in the issue work together to achieve the goal of protecting the interest of children without neglecting the advertising industry itself.

SUBLIMINAL ADVERTISING

One of the areas that interest researchers the most is the area of subliminal advertising. Caccavale, Wanty III, and Edell (1982) found out that there is no significant relationship to prove that sexual implants would be likely to favorably affect attitudes and purchase intentions when used in conjunction with sexually suggestive copy. In fact another study done to review 50 years of research on subliminal advertising proves that no research has shown an effect that changed attitudes or impacted purchasing behavior (Broyles, 2006). Basically some scholars argue the subliminal advertising communication can be produced through briefly flashing a visual stimulus too quickly for individuals to be consciously aware of its existence, using sub-audible messages, and through the use of embedded stimuli, words and pictures (Lantos, 1996). A survey by Rogers and Seiler (1994) shows that the nearly all their samples[2] deny the use of subliminal advertising and those who admit using subliminal advertising did not understand the true meaning of subliminal advertising. Some scholars argue that subliminal advertising can come in the forms of product placement in which the products are seen as being a part of the movie or a TV program without being specifically referred to (Tasi, Liang, & Liu, 2007).

SEX AND GENDER STEREOTYPE

Apart from subliminal advertising, another area that has stimulated research interests among scholars is in the area of sex and gender manipulation and exploitation in advertising. Women have been the focal point of sexual advertising in the past but the male counterparts

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[2] A sample of 256 respondents made up of advertising practitioners and their clients

are catching up fast (Blair, Stephenson, Hill, & Green, 2006). Cohan (2001) argues that advertisements can be successful in generating sales without portraying women as things or sexual object, and without perpetuating various weakness stereotypes. As marketers struggle to differentiate and draw attention to their product offerings, the use of erotic content has become increasingly frequent (Henthorne & LaTour, 1995). A study on images of men and women in mobile phone advertisements in Germany shows that certain means of emphasizing stereotypes such as feminine touch are still widely used but in decreasing frequencies (Dorig & Poschl, 2006). In addition, advertisers failed to portray women as smart and independent (Kaur, 2007).

In a study done to compare gender stereotyping between masculine and feminine countries, it was found that compared to feminine countries, advertisements in masculine countries portray female characters less in a working role and they also treat these characters as sex objects (Schroder, Wulf, & Hofstee, 2002). In order to break away from stereotypes against women and improve their marketing communications, advertisers should emphasize on making use of dual roles, role switching, and role blending (Wee, Choong, & Tambyah, 1995). Advertising does not portray men and women in realistic ways because the images we see daily reveal the class ideology of our society (Mayne, 2000). The advertisers need to reconsider the use of strong overt sexual appeals, especially given the controversial issue surrounding, such advertising stimuli and their fashionable use to crack through the media clutter (LaTour & Henthorne, 1994).

Even though gender and sexual stereotypes are among the highly publicized unethical use and application of advertising, the industry itself is allegedly also guilty of perpetuating stereotypes and discrimination related to age (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2000). Apart from that, not only are older people not used very often in mainstream advertising, there are also a very limited number of products that old people are considered suitable to advertise (Carrigan & Szmigin, 2000b). In UK, the agencies are cautious when using older models because they are afraid that their action might alienate the younger viewers

of their advertisements (Szmigin & Carrigan, 2000). This is supported by a research in the US in which it shows that in majority of the television commercials, the elderly are not casted as major roles (Swayne & Greco, 1987). Even though there are voluntary advertising codes that govern the issue of tobacco advertising, 17 percent of the models used in these advertisements are under the age of 25 because regardless of viewers' age, the younger models are considered to be more attractive than the older models (Mazis, Ringold, Perry, & Denman, 1992). Peterson, Milliman and Erefmeyer (1992; 1990) argue that advertisers are making a serious error for neglecting this segment of the population because the size and demand from this segment is growing.

THEOLOGICAL INTEPRETATION

There are numerous researches focusing on the theological perspectives on business ethics. Gould (1995) discusses the Buddhist ethical approach and relates this approach to how it may be applied to business ethical concerns. He believes that the Buddhist standpoint on inner thought and feelings will illuminate ethical concerns in exceptionally realistic ways. Another interesting study was done to evaluate the Ten Commandments approach in three main religions in the world[3] and try to provide implications regarding the use of Ten Commandments in work and business organizations (Ali & Gibbs, 1998).

In another study, Rice attempts to explore the Islamic perspective on business ethics and provide some knowledge of Islamic philosophy in order to help managers do business in Muslim cultures where in Islam, the ethics dominates economics and not the other way around such as when a free-market capitalist economy uses market-determined prices as a filtering mechanism to distribute resources (Rice, 1999). The Islamic worldview implies that the market arrangement should be maintained, but that the price mechanism be complemented with a mechanism that minimizes unnecessary claims on resources. Wilson (2001) argues that it is inappropriate to generalize about business

ethics across the ethnically diverse countries of the Islamic world which are at very different stages of development.

A study was done to examine the fundamentalism, conservatism, and intrinsic religiousness dimensions and their ability to predict students' willingness to behave unethically and it resulted in a negative relationship between the three dimensions and the willingness to behave unethically (Kennedy & Lawton, 1998). In other words, the higher the level of fundamentalism, conservatism and intrinsic religiousness in a person, the more unlikely for that individual to commit unethical business activities. This is further supported by a study by Conroy and Emerson (2004) which shows that religiosity is a statistically significant predictor of responses in a number of ethical scenarios.

Another application of theology in business ethics is by making contribution through the religious imagination by studying the imagination's use of religious metaphor with regard to profit and to the third world debt (Magill, 1992). A study on attitudes toward advertising in Islam shows that there are three types of perceptions beliefs; (1) Those who believe that advertising poses s serious threat toward the Saudi economy, (2) Those who believe that it can bring some benefits to the economy but at the same time poses certain threats to cultural beliefs, and (3) Those who believe that there is not threat and in some ways it can contribute to the well-being of the society and the economy of the country (Al-Makaty, Van Tubergen, Whitlow, & Boud, 1996).

Apart from the theological ethics approaches in business and the applied ethics approach towards understanding advertising ethics, there are also researches that focus on the theological perspectives on advertising ethics. Even though these approaches are theological in nature, they are still under the applied ethics approach because they are more concerned towards the impacts and effect of advertising on the society and the economy. For example, a study was done in five different countries to gauge the influence of religion on attitudes towards the advertising of controversial products (Fam, Waller, & Erdogan, 2004). Even though using different religions as constructs of the research,

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[3] Islam, Judaism and Christianity

this study does not focus on studying the operational definition of advertising ethics and how people out to behave or act as far as advertising ethics is concerned thus this research is focusing on the applied ethics practices. Another example to illustrate the practice of employing the theological applied ethics approach in studying advertising ethics is a research by Rice and al-Mossawi on the implications of Islam for advertising messages (Rice & al-Mossawi, 2002). The authors suggested that due to the fact that Muslims in the Middle Eastern countries share the same beliefs, the advertising messages intended for those countries will be the same.

Another prominent study on the advertising ethics through a theological perspective was done by the Pontifical Council for Social Communication, Vatican City. The Council (1997) acknowledges the importance of advertising in the society and views it as 'gifts of god' that brings people together. The objectives of the monograph were to: (1) Call awareness to constructive contributions that advertising can and does make, (2) Note ethical and moral problems that advertising can and does rise, (3) Point to moral principle that apply to this field, and (4) Suggest certain steps for consideration of those professionally involved in advertising (Pontifical Council for Social Communication, 1997). In the monograph, the Vatican laid out the benefit, the harms, some ethical and moral principles worth considering, and steps to be taken to improve the current situation regarding advertising ethics (Foley, 1999). In discussing the benefits of advertising, the Council divides these benefits into four different segments; economic, political, cultural, and moral and religious benefit and the same four segments are then used again in their explanation on harms of advertising (Richards J. I., 1997).

The monograph does not come without any weaknesses. Murphy (1998) argues that the monograph has several weaknesses that range from being too general in nature, mixing a lot of different issues throughout, too idealistic or unrealistic in some places, and avoiding from citing the secular literature. Foley (1998) also acknowledges that issues such as the use of product placements in films and television programs, the promotion of products connected with the programs being shown, and also endorsements of products by famous persons should be included in the monograph in the first place. Brenkert (1998) argues that in the monograph, the Council argues from one-sided perspective that advertisers are morally responsible in the market and rejects the view in which the consumers have responsibility for their own decisions.

CONCLUSION

Based on the literature on ethics and advertising, it is evident that the current research on advertising ethics are focused on issues such as deceptive advertising, subliminal advertising, sex, age and gender manipulation, celebrity endorsement, industry regulation and self-regulation, advertising to children and a few studies on practitioners and advertising stakeholders. There are relatively few studies focusing on the theological aspect of advertising ethics such as the Christianity views on advertising ethics which is evident through the article written by Foley that focuses only on benefits and harms of advertising. The author believes that the area of theological approaches to advertising ethics is a new area to venture into and in need of a thorough study.

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