

Media ethics, the unattainable ideal essay



Society is increasingly being affected by the fashion and advertising industries promoting images of beauty ideals unattainable for most women. Images of wafer-thin models are contributing to distorted body images, low self-esteem and eating disorders amongst young women. The advertising agencies are packing their ads with emaciated, vacant imagery, so ubiquitous that it takes on a semblance of normalcy.

Suggestions of unattainable beauty and the competitive modeling industry are in some fatal cases resulting in death of runway models, and now several fashion/cosmetic institutions are constructing new guidelines banning the representation of underweight models. The issue to be addressed is why the fashion, entertainment and advertising industries continuously seem to maintain this unhealthy standard, simultaneously rejected and admired by the public. (Christians, Fackler, Richardson, Kreshel & Woods, 2012, p. 144),

1. "Values" As an advertiser it is necessary to consider the social impact an advertising campaign may have on the general public. Advertisers are careful about the values and attitudes to be promoted and encouraged, endorsing some while overlooking others. This selectivity gives the lie to the belief that advertising does no more than mirror the surrounding culture. In a society where beauty is idealized and underweight models are considered perfection, it has become normal for the industry to advertise beauty products and clothing that appeal to the public promoting these potentially harmful ideals.

Anticipating the public's perception of an advertisement is a complex process. As an advertiser it is your profession to sell products and services,

or better yet, hopes and dreams in disguise. Reflecting upon the fact that one simultaneously sells values, ideals and models- advertisers become a social agent, indicating which standards society, or more case-specifically young girls will consider as “ normal” or “ beautiful”. Changeability, the ability to modify or adapt to differing circumstances and demands, is valued.

Should the public clearly demand “ healthier” images, and more “ achievable” ideals, advertisers should give them what they want. Still, as society is shaped today, the result of these “ normal” campaigns still remains controversial, and what the public is attracted to remains uncertain. Will women be attracted to a product represented by a more “ normal” model, or are they essentially intrigued to buy products promising an unattainable beauty ideal (hope) integrated in society? Honesty, hope and responsibility are other important principles to value.

One ought to reserve the social responsibility for the impact your advertisement may have on a young, insecure woman. It is important to value truthful, heartfelt communication and to openly inform target audiences that the images portrayed are unrealistic, and that they are used to sell a product, and exist mainly in industries where women get paid to look a certain way. Honoring legal and truthful values are also of significance, by not attempting to sell consumers products on false pretenses.

The roles of honesty and truth telling also surface in the tension between taking creative license and providing harmful or misleading advertising. Client satisfaction, good judgment, and integrity are also core values. An

advertising agency's role should be reactive, responding to both clients' wishes and market preferences.

2. "Principles" According to the Institute for Advertising Ethics (IAE) there are eight principles and practices for advertising ethics that should be followed by any media, editorial, news or marketing communication. Principle number 5 clearly states, "Advertisers should treat consumers fairly based on the nature of the audience to whom the ads are directed and the nature of the product or service advertised". (Advertising Code of Ethics, http://www.aaf.org/images/public/aaf_content/images/ad%20ethics/IAE_Principles_Practices.pdf, september 2012). Agencies distributing advertisements should exercise due care in the perception of advertisements and their presentation to the public. Advertising unhealthy images of models to young women might be interpreted as an indicator as to how they should look, resulting in harmful consequences as mentioned.

Advertisers should take the overall responsibility for the effect of their campaigns by acknowledging their social responsibility. Confucius's golden mean says, "moral virtue is the appropriate location between two extremes" (Christians, Fackler, Richardson, Kreshel & Woods, 2012, p. 12). This principle applies to the ethical dilemmas of an advertiser facing competing obligations; the potentially harmful social impact of an advertisement, in addition to a professional responsibility; creating an attraction to your clients product.

The two extremes in this case would be to either reject photo-shopped, wafer thin images completely, or continuing to use this advertising tool effectively

and projecting the overall responsibility to other industries and blame society for its own superficial standards. Practicing Confucius's mean, an advertiser should reject both extremes by informing the target audience of the unnatural and unhealthy circumstances surrounding the marketing of these ideals, yet complying to their professional obligations by publishing them and maintaining their current standards, as long as they don't violate advertising laws.

Principle number 7 of the IAE notes, " Advertisers should follow federal, state and local advertising laws, and cooperate with industry self-regulatory programs for the resolution of advertising practices. " Ethical advertising must be truthful and not misleading, according to the Council of Better Business Bureau's Code of Business Practices.

By practicing this principle they should present the disconnections between advertisements and reality, but as long as the public don't demand that they set new standards, and their current standards don't conflict with principle number seven, they are free to continue as normal. (Christians, Fackler, Richardson, Kreshel & Woods, 2012, p. 147). Applying Mill's principle of Utility for advertising would be deceptive, arguably because the fundamental question of how beneficial all forms of advertising really is to society remains ambiguous.

As an advertiser we may rationalize our actions by claiming we serve an economic function, providing jobs and artistic freedom. But the genuine value of the constant haggling of advertising remains suspect. Advertisers might try to add value where there is no value to be added. The utilitarian

principle says to do what is right or wrong by considering what will yield the best consequences for human welfare. (Christians, Fackler, Richardson, Kreshel & Woods, 2012, p. 15).

By examining how much benefit or harm an advertisement could have on the lives of everyone affected, including ourselves, we are morally obligated to choose the alternative that maximizes value or minimizes loss. In this particular profession, this principle is virtually impossible to implement, considering the vast amount of people affected by the exposure to your advertisement, and the few people's satisfaction of creating it.

3. " Loyalties" Similar to any professional environment, a significant part of an advertisers loyalty lays within the agency or client. Still, as an individual, you have values and principles that may interfere with those of the agency or firm. In most circumstances your work requires you to maximize profit, but if raising profit means reinforcing unhealthy attitudes amongst young women, your professional duties contradict your duty to society. Our careerism may tempt us to act out of self-interest, convincing ourselves that the ultimate responsibility lies within the public or within other industries like fashion, media or film creating these unhealthy ideals.

We also have a duty to our clients, who pay us to create and distribute effective advertising to generate attraction to their products. Even though these duties are significant, our duty to society must always be primarily considered. Advertisers have the ability to shape attitudes, and should accept responsibility for the possibly harmful consequences these may have.

In 1995, 34 per cent of high school aged girls in the US considered themselves overweight, compared to an astonishing 90 per cent today.

Over half of the females between the ages of 18 and 25 claim that they would prefer to be run over by a truck than be fat, and another 2/3 would rather be mean or stupid. (Courtney E. Martin? Simon & Schuster, 2007).

Outrageous facts like these indicate that the publishing and fashion industries in doubtfully have had a considerably negative impact on society over the past two decades. When the industries idealistic standards result in psychological disorders, depression and even death amongst women, to benefit the agency or individual careers duties predominantly is unethical.

The question remains, are we creating culture or merely reacting to it? Even though the faults undoubtedly are results of a combined effort of developing standards and competing industries, loyalty to the common good of society should demand superiority. Debates turn upon the question of whether and to what extent advertising professionals and agencies should make moral judgments about, or shape the moral intent of, the ads they produce, or whether they should leave these judgments to external sources of authority like clients, consumers or government and industry regulators.