Examining Advertising Practitioners' Ethical Considerations and Its Implications For Consumer Welfare

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Little work has been done in consumer research to address advertising practitioners’ beliefs about the impact of advertising on consumers. To explore this issue, 20 individuals working in a U.S. advertising agency participated in a qualitative study. In contrast to past research, the findings reveal that practitioners display a prevalent concern about the impact of advertising on women. However, despite the fact that recent research has shown men may be negatively impacted by advertising, men were seen as immune from media influence. Theoretical implications for the construction of vulnerable audiences, as well as consumer welfare ramifications are offered.

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of product quality examination under different promotional frames. After the shopping process, we forced all participants to divide their price perceptions of the promotion frames into two mental accounts by asking them to sell back the scarves one by one to the experimenter. This enabled us to detect their IRP separately for the focal and tie-in products under different promotional frames. In study 2, all procedures above were repeated, excluding bundles providing different items (i.e., pitchers and chopsticks each priced at NT$79). 107 undergraduate students participated in study 2.

Results showed that when bundled with the similar products, consumers perceived “buy one, get one free” as two mental accounts, since their IRPs for focal and tie-in products were different (Mean_{focal}=99.66 vs. Mean_{tie-in}=75.96, t=-2.873, p<0.05). In addition, consumers perceived the highest IRP under the “buy one, get one free” frame. By contrast, the “buy one, and the second one is only $1” frame (Mean_{focal}=65.58 vs. Mean_{tie-in}=57.30, t=-0.519, p=0.61) and the “buy two, get 50% off” frame (Mean_{focal}=75.33 vs. Mean_{tie-in}=59.76, t=1.763, p=0.09) were perceived as only one mental account. However, when different products were included in the bundle, the “buy one, the second one is only $1” frame was perceived as two mental accounts (Mean_{focal}=69.23 vs. Mean_{tie-in}=43.58, t=5.477, p<0.05). Further, the IRP of the focal product was highest in the “buy one, the second one is only $1” frame, followed by “buy one, get one free”, and “buy two, get 50% off”.

The investigation of the IRP of the focal product shows that consumer perceptions are influenced by not only the promotional frames but also by the bundled components. When the focal and tie-in were similar products, “buy one, the second one is only $1” and “buy two, get 50% off” seem to be coded as one mental account. That is probably the result of both frames providing discounts linked to price directly, since consumers probably categorize them as price-off promotions (Sawyer and Dickson 1984). Further, since consumers may integrate the price reduction after a “% off” and “$1” but not after an extra-product promotion, they perceive the highest IRP of focal product in the “buy one, get one free” frame.

When the bundle consists of different products, the “buy one, the second one is only $1” frame is perceived as two mental accounts. Because the tie-in product is different from the focal one, the IRP of the tie-in product is less easily computed. Hence, most consumers ignore the insignificant payment of NT$1 (about 3 US cents) and regard the tie-in product as an extra, free product. Our studies reveal that the “buy one, the second one is only $1” frame may pull down the IRP of the focal product of the bundle if the products are similar, but not if they are different. Our research shows that marketers should be careful when manipulating bundle promotional frames and take composition of the bundle into consideration when accounting for consumer responses.

References

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Past research indicates that literature on advertising ethics has neither adequately addressed the range of problems faced by practitioners (Hunt and Chonko 1987) nor those by consumers (Treise, Weigold, Conna and Garrison 1994). Little work has been done in consumer research to address decision makers’—that is, advertising practitioners’—beliefs about ethical dilemmas (exceptions include Drumwright and Murphy 2004; Hunt and Chonko 1987; Moon and Frank 2000). In fact, advertising ethics seems to have largely eluded consumer researchers (Hyman, Tansey and Clark 1994).

However, one issue that has arisen as significant in popular and scholarly discourse and through efforts in feminist literature (Kilbourne 1999; Bordo 1993; Wolf 1991) is that of gendered stereotyping in advertisements, and specifically its implications for women. These discourses, generally portraying women as a “vulnerable” audience, draw from a history of gendered expressions of the marketplace (Bristor and Fischer 1993; Hirschman 1993; Ramsay 1996; Schroeder 1997; see also Baker, Gentry and Rittenburg 2005 for a discussion of boundaries of vulnerability). Within the framework of consumer theory, vulnerability is not associated with maleness or male consumers as a category. These dialogues, focusing on female vulnerability but neglecting male responses have affected not only the practices of the advertising industry, but also ethical determinations of those practices.
Recent research has demonstrated men compare themselves to advertising ideals and may experience feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability (Tuncay 2006). Yet, no research to date specifically considers how or if advertising practitioners identify ethical dilemmas that involve male consumers.

Methodology
To investigate how advertising practitioners conceptualize the impact of advertising on consumers, particularly males, a qualitative approach consisting of interviews, focus groups, and field observations was used. One of the researchers was allowed access to a large advertising agency in the U.S. where she was fully immersed in the day-to-day operations of a team of advertising professionals working on a brand targeting men. The researcher conducted formal and informal interviews, as well as focus groups with a total of 20 individuals working in a broad range of agency functions. During the interviews, informants were asked “grand tour” questions (McCracken 1988), as well as focused questions on how advertising impacts consumers. For purposes of anonymity, neither the sex of the informant, nor his/her job title are attributed to informants’ quotes. To analyze the data, both researchers sought emergent themes in the text while also referring back to the literature, a process called dialectical tacking (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

Findings
Our data revealed evidence of “moral myopia” or a “distortion of moral visions that prevents moral issues from coming into focus” as discussed by Drumwright and Murphy (2004, p.7). For example, one informant reflected a “going native” attitude, stating while he/she found some ads offensive, “I push them through because that’s my job, my loyalty is with [the client].” However, while our findings resonated with past research, a new type of moral myopia was illuminated.

Women as a Protected Audience/Men as an Immune Audience: While several informants were concerned about how advertising portrayed women, there was little recognition that men were impacted by advertising depictions. For example, during a creative review, an ad script was read in which a joke was made about a woman. Immediately after, both the female researcher and female practitioner were consulted to ensure the ad was not offensive or demeaning.

Such consideration was not given to men. While negative representations such as “womanizer” and “stupid dad” were mentioned by informants, many felt men were not significantly impacted by them. During one interview, an informant acknowledged that while men may feel “a little bit of pressure” to fulfill ideals portrayed in advertising, he/she stated, “I feel like the female side of it’s a little bit stronger,” and that men “put it on themselves.” Another informant stated that men would not likely be impacted by or be offended by ads, “…if women see even themselves objectified in advertising? that maybe would cause a stronger aversion to something than if men… [had] been picked on.” When probed by the researcher, he/she stated, “Maybe its just gender differences.” Thus, while men were often seen as immune to the influence of advertising, when this impact was recognized, it was often discounted. Informants also discussed relatively narrow gender portrayals of men in advertising. One informant stated, “…if some boy… says something that’s not in man code, they get made fun of. So there’s definitely… defined roles that I think males play in advertising but then also in culture…”

Discussion
Thus, women were discussed as an audience who needs protection while men were deemed to be immune to the negative impact of advertising. Moreover, male role portrayals seemed to be strictly defined by practitioners and required adherence to a “man code.” These findings reflect broader cultural and gender discourses in American society. Societal ideals about gender suggest that men are powerful, show little emotion, and should be resistant to pain (Harris 1995; Lindsey 1997) while women are passive (Scott 2005). Moreover, other researchers have discussed the conflicting and restricting notions of masculinity in advertising and in broader cultural discourse (Firat 1994; Pleck 1981).

In contrast to Drumwright and Murphy’s (2004) findings of widespread moral myopia, we observed a prevalent concern among practitioners about how women are impacted by ads. However, this consideration did not extend to men. From a theoretical perspective, this research questions the constructions of vulnerable audiences, an issue with important repercussions on advertising practice and regulatory measures as well as public perception. Just as with men, men are impacted by ads (Tuncay 2006), and limited portrayals restrict the roles that men experience in their own lives. However, a positive implication of the results indicates that advertisers are responsive, even if slowly, to popular and scholarly discourse about advertising images’ implications; and, as Drumwright and Murphy noted, advertisers can be successful while at the same time ethically cognizant. This responsiveness suggests an opportunity for consumer researchers to take an active role in addressing constructions of audience vulnerability and influencing consumer welfare.

References