
Is Advertising A Morally Problematic Issue: Evaluation Through The Deontological Ethical Theory Of Kantianism

A prevalent issue in business ethics is whether or not advertising is morally problematic since it can be prone to deception, manipulation and association of non-market desires with a marketed product. Whether it be the advertising strategy, production or quality of the product people are continuously finding ways to get away with the good and the bad of advertising. In this essay, I will evaluate four advertisements based on their ethical purpose while adopting the deontological ethical theory of Kantianism, developed by Immanuel Kant, to show that this argument proves to be truthful that advertising is morally problematic.

The first controversial advertisement I selected is one put out by an organization called People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA for short) in which a model/actress named Pamela Anderson is pictured sitting in a sexualized position wearing a small bikini top and bottoms with her body parts labeled in black marker to essentially imply that she has the same parts as the animals in which we kill to eat. This ad is attempting to convey that since the animals that we are killing for food have the same parts as us humans (specifically women) it is basically as if we are killing our own. The motivation behind using a known female sex icon as the body of this advertisement further sexualizes women as it is questionable why they did not select a male to use for this advertisement or even include a male alongside a female. I understand the importance of animal rights messages, but by sexualizing women and treating women like a piece of meat by not putting a man in the advertisement at all is sexist, manipulative and surely emphasizes the use of non-market desires (i.e. sexuality) to convey their desired and extremely important message. Therefore, between the deceptive motives and intentions to put this advertisement out and the use of the female body to get attention and support for animal cruelty I would say this ad is not successful and deceptive to the society. Kant would say this advertisement is not ethical as he is of strong believe for intrinsic values and not treating people as objects i.e. how Pamela Anderson was used in the ad and comparing humans to animals, animals are owned by humans and showing a female is that to say that females are equivalent to animals being owned by men. Had the advertiser shown in their advertisement how ending animal cruelty is the key to keeping healthy since it is one's duty and right thing to do, then this act would be considered ethical. But, if one's intention is to enforce the practice of ending animal cruelty and by default increasing market size and sell the message would be considered unethical. Therefore, it is safe to say that this advertisement was created based on the company's self-interest beliefs of enlarging income and growing the product view with an aim to exploit the core wants and needs of consumers while acting like a distraction from the product itself.

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The second advertisement selected is from the brand Sisley, which is a fashion brand that sells makeup, skincare and fragrance. This advertisement shows two models leaning over a table that has a white spaghetti strap dress lying on the counter. The two models are using what appear to be straws to make it seem as if they are snorting the dress on the table with the caption "fashion junkie". Sisley using drugs to advertise for their brand is controversial as they are using an act of in taking drugs to sell their product, which has nothing to do with drugs. According to Kant, this advertisement would not be ethical because the motives behind the actions are not accepted worldwide to be actions that are moral and would not be accepted if anyone performed them. We have a moral obligation to do the right thing and going against the law by using drugs would be considered otherwise. The advertisement from the brand Sisley seems to want to normalize drug use and kind of promotes it to a certain extent. The women in the advertisement are very thin as well thin, extremely high and in a dangerous state. The connection between staying thin in the fashion industry and the known side effect that cocaine use can make you lose weight adds to the questionable judgment of this campaign's creators and therefore would be considered morally unethical.

The third advertisement is from the brand Old Spice and it pictures a man in the shower on a horse made of soap foam and a woman standing outside the shower in a towel with the saying "Make sure your man smells like a man". The application of Kant's theory to advertising would be resisted by the advertising community and marketers. 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 color. Kantian philosophy would never favor use of a person's physical attributes (in this case, the skin color) as a method to sell. 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.

The last advertisement I chose is an ad from the beverage brand called Vitamin Water. The punch line on this advertisement is "flu shots are so last year". This is a great example of 'misleading advertising' as Vitamin Water has created a false impression to the consumer that its product can be used in place of vaccinations against the flu. All because the sugary water contains Vitamin C, doesn't make it a substitute for seeing a doctor to say the least. According to Kant, this advertisement would be deemed as unethical as it is misleading since it is our duty and obligation to tell the truth and this advertisement does not do so. If it were so easy to prevent the flu they would have had us drinking these types of drinks ages ago instead of sticking needles in our arms. Since most people are not big fans of needles then having an ad like so would only increase the consumers' interest in a product like so when little do they know that vitamin water will never prevent the flu. This advertisement would be deemed yet again unethical.

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By adopting a Kantian school of thought it can be concluded that advertising is not ethically acceptable as it is too often taken advantage of by people and manipulated to selfishly get their message across with the will to risk lying for sales. One who is a follower of Kantianism would be said to be a believer that the principles behind actions are what matter rather than an action's results and therefore acting rightly requires being motivated by proper universal principles that treat everyone with respect. Advertising allows too much room for people to use deception and manipulation and it is our duty to act morally and do what is best for the majority and when that is being taken advantage of that is not ethical. It is important to carry out duty, good will and follow what is truth because our intentions are the most important thing behind our actions essentially. Unless people are willing to put more truth into advertising than falsehood, I see no reason to continue with the current advertising technique being used today.

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