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Ethics in Advertising Cigarettes

An Assignment Submitted by

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What is Popular Culture?

Loosely defined, advertising is the communication between a potential buyer and a seller that is openly addressed to a group audience. The aim of this communication is to persuade the target audience to either continue or start purchasing the seller's product. Since its inception, advertising has faced much criticism for violating ethical standards by delivering less information about certain products. Cigarette advertisements, in particular, have been noted to be carrying more abhorrent violations of ethical principles.

The advertising of cigarettes seems to represent the basic right to freedom of expression. However, this right is limited insofar as no harm to others occurs. Cigarette smoking is the major cause of deaths from lung cancer, and many experts claim it to be the key avoidable cause of death in society (Chapman, 1996).

The intention of advertisers is to portray products in such a way that will maximize their desirability to potential consumers. Though legal, numerous elements of cigarette advertising tactics have been the focus of public discussion with consideration as to whether these practices are suitable for a potentially dangerous product, and consequently, these tactics raise ethical queries. It is possible to evaluate the ethical dimensions of cigarette advertising practice based on three main components: the intent of the action, the means or methods of the practice implementation, and the consequences of the tactic (DelPo, 1999).

Utilitarianism puts forward the claim that ethical decisions should maximize benefits for society and minimize harm, that is, the best ethical decision is the one that produces the greatest benefit for society (George, 2006). Consequently, it is possible to argue that advertising

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cigarettes is unethical because of the adverse long-term disadvantages that smoking causes to society. These cause illness and premature loss of life lowering the productivity of society.

From the deontological point of view, doing what is right, with individual wellbeing as the most important element of every decision, is top priority when making ethical decisions (George, 2006). Owing to the addictive nature and the harmful effects of tobacco, the deontological approach dictates that any activity, which encourages the use of tobacco, is morally wrong.

The maxim behind Kantian ethics is that for an act to be acceptable, it ought to be applicable to everyone without an inconsistency occurring (George, 2006). Cigarette advertisements are known to use persuasive advertising and are arguably unethical owing to the fact that, drawing on Kantian ethics, it affects the consumer's autonomy by convincing them to purchase goods, which they do not need. Furthermore, it has been noted that the target audience of cigarette advertisements is the youth population (Chapman, 1996). Based on Kantian ethics, one can conclude that cigarette advertisements are unethical, as they are not applicable to all populations without causing adverse reactions. This is because the marketing of tobacco products is different from other products, because consumers may not be able to stop buying the product because of the addictive nature of cigarettes (DelPo, 1999).

For instance, numerous cigarette advertisements create brand images to attract young consumers. Most marketing strategies attract youth to cigarettes by positioning smoking as an initiation into adulthood (Chapman, 1996). Appealing images of prestige, power, success, and sex appeal are placed before a mass audience, creating an affirmative connection between smoking and 'the good life'. Such advertisements unconsciously arouse a powerful craving that does not logically weigh against a person's best interest.

Based on the above arguments, it is evident that consumers are defenseless in controlling the barrage of messages that they face, and they cannot resist to some extent the effect that those messages have. This places a heavy burden on the targeted group, because the product being offered is dangerous. Consequently, the production and advertisement of cigarettes can be argued to be unethical according to utilitarian, Kantian, and deontological views of ethics. The government is morally duty-bound to prohibit the endorsement of a product associated with much affliction and devastation.

References

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