

Social Impact and Ethical Advertisements

Matthew C. Mason

Professor Kimberly King

University of West Alabama

The purpose of this assignment is to discuss and evaluate the social impact that advertisements have on society from an ethical point of view. To begin, I will define ethics from an advertising perspective and briefly discuss the social impact of ethics in advertising. Next, for evaluation, I will provide an example of two recent controversial advertisements and discuss their social impact from an ethical point of view. Finally, I will conclude with a brief summary. Appendices are included with screenshots of each advertisement for reference.

The social impact of ethics in advertising is a complex subject. To begin, ethics in advertising refers to a set of moral principles that govern the marketing communications for any service or product (Juneja, 2021). Although complex, ethics can simply be described as right and wrong or good and bad. Since there is no universal definition of right and wrong, being ethical in advertising means being socially responsible and adapting to socially accepted values that are commonly viewed as good for the welfare of society (Weigold & Arens, 2021, p.78). In contrast, being unethical in advertising means not conforming to socially accepted values and doing what is commonly viewed as unfavorable or bad for the welfare of society. Since advertisers have control over the messages they create, they are also ethically responsible for the impacts those messages may have on society. If an advertiser creates an ethical advertisement, it generally has a positive impact on society. However, if the advertiser makes an unethical advertisement—the social impact is negative. Below are two examples of unethical advertisements for the years 2020 and 2021.

In November 2020, Footwear News (FN) published an unethical ad from Reebok featuring the popular music artist Cardi B (see Appendix A). In the ad, Cardi B promotes her debut line of shoes, where her image is edited to resemble the sacred Hindu goddess, Durga. The intended target audience was her fans and followers, but she unintentionally drew the attention of

the entire Hindu culture. This advertisement was offensive because it was a form of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is when someone disrespectfully adopts something from a culture that is not their own (Staff, 2021). After receiving backlash for the offense, Cardi B issued an apology on Twitter by stating her intent was to “represent the goddess who represents strength, femininity, and liberation.” In response, her apology was widely accepted by fans, and the image was removed from the FN website. Reebok acknowledged they should have chosen a more appropriate deity to represent Cardi B’s native western culture to make the ad less offensive (Rodrigues, 2020). Although the ad was offensive to the Hindu culture, the apology was accepted, and the controversy produced enough buzz on social media to persuade Cardi B’s followers to buy nearly every pair (Johns, 2020)!

In March 2021, the popular music artist Lil Nas X unethically advertised a custom line of Nike Air Max 97s called “Satan Shoes” (See Appendix B). Said to contain real human blood, this advertisement was both offensive to his religious followers and deceptive for buyers who were misled to think it was an official collaboration with Nike. The intended target market for the Satan Shoes was edgy followers of the artist and hip-hop culture. Although Lil Nas X intended to create buzz by promoting a controversial product, he unintentionally woke the beast and got himself into a lawsuit from Nike. This advertisement was obviously offensive to his religious followers because Satan represents everything that is wrong and bad in the world. In other words, Satan represents everything that’s unethical. Perhaps if Lil Nas X wanted to be less offensive, he could have made a statement claiming it was for a joke or entertainment. Instead, Lil Nas X doubled down and actually tried to profit from the shoe. Unfortunately, this was not only unethical, but it was also unlawful because he did not have the permission or rights to promote the Nike brand. Although the advertisement did persuade many followers to purchase

the shoes (they sold out in under a minute), the ad's success didn't last long. Shortly after posting the ad, Nike ordered a cease-and-desist and filed a lawsuit. After settling out of court, Lil Nas X was forced to remove all promotions for the Satans while providing a voluntary recall and full refund for anyone who made a purchase of the shoes (Goldman, 2021).

In summary, we can see the social impact of ethics in advertising can be positive or negative. For an advertisement to have a positive social impact, it must adhere to ethical values that are socially responsible for the welfare of society (Weigold & Arens, 2021, p.78). Although there is no universal definition of right and wrong or good and bad in ethics, it's easy to see the difference when they occur. As the saying goes, hindsight is 2020. In the case of Cardi B and Reebok, we can see that a simple apology can sometimes repair the negative impact caused by unethical advertising. While in the case of Lil Nas X and Nike, we can see that unethical advertising sometimes ends in a lawsuit. In any case, advertisers must be mindful of ethics and the potential positive or negative impact of each message that they create.

References:

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Appendix A:

2020 Reebok Advertisement with Cardi B



Appendix B:

2021 Lil Nas X Advertisement for Satan Shoes

