

# THE ETHICAL JUDGMENT OF AN ADVERTISEMENT AND ITS EFFECTS

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## ABSTRACT

Occasionally marketers develop advertisements that many consumers find unethical. For example, some ads contain nudity, suggestive poses, and even embedded figures and words, all of which some consumers find unethical (Widing, et al. 1991). Despite the use of such questionable ad content, the relationship of the ethical judgment of an ad and consumer responses to the ad has received relatively little attention. The purpose of the current research is to fill this void by examining the relationship of ethical judgment of an advertisement and selected advertising effectiveness response variables.

An advertisement selected for its potential to evoke ethical considerations of the ad (see Widing, et al. 1991) was shown to a sample of 312 college students from two Southern universities via slide projector. Respondents completed a questionnaire about the ad designed to measure ethical judgment of the ad, perceived ad credibility, attitude toward the advertiser, toward advertising, evoked pleasure and arousal from the ad, and the more traditional ad effects measures attitude toward the ad, attitude toward the brand, purchase intention.

Ethical judgment of the ad was found to be significantly correlated with all ad effects measured in the study. Further, the sample was divided into the top third and low third on ethical perception of the ad to serve as the dependent variable in a multivariate analysis. Results indicate that the effects of ethical judgment on all independent variables used were statistically significant.

This is the first known research to offer evidence about the relationship between ethical judgment of an advertisement and consumer responses to the ad. The findings of the research indicate a strong effect of ethical judgment of an advertisement on the key consumer response variables purchase intention, attitude

toward the brand, attitude toward the ad, and the antecedents of  $A_{ad}$ .

Although ethical judgment was expected to affect the selected measures, the pervasiveness of the effect on all measures is especially noteworthy. While recent advertising effectiveness research has emphasized the importance of mood/emotions, ad credibility, and advertiser reputation (MacKenzie and Lutz 1989) evoked by an advertisement and the resulting effects on advertising response variables, this research indicates that the ethical judgment evoked by an advertisement has a significant influence on *all* consumer response measures used in this study.

The implication of these findings to advertisers is rather straightforward. The use of perceived unethical factors in advertisements may significantly affect consumer responses to ads in a negative manner; thus, the use of potentially unethical advertisements may have negative ramifications for advertisers. The results highlight the importance of assessing consumer ethical evaluations of potentially problematic ads by consumers prior to their use in marketing programs.

## REFERENCES

- MacKenzie, Scott B. and Richard J. Lutz (1989), "An Empirical Examination of the Structural Antecedents of Attitude Toward the Ad in an Advertising Pretesting Context," *Journal of Marketing*, 53 (April), 48-65.
- Widing, Robert E. II, Ronald Hoverstad, Ronald Coulter, and Gene Brown (1991), "The VASE Scales: Measures of Viewpoints About Sexual Embeds in Advertising," *Journal of Business Research*, 10 (April), 285-293.