

Marketing the media with sexuality and violence: Is it ethical?

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ABSTRACT

Sexuality and violence in the media have received significant attention by the researchers in communication studies. Unlike the extant literature, this research considers these phenomena as marketing instruments used by the mass media and approaches them from business ethics perspective. It aims at determining whether the use of sexuality and violence by the media institutions is ethical according to business ethics theories. It seeks to answer the research question by examining some fundamental business ethics theories, namely Kantian, Utilitarian, Aristotelian and Contractarian approaches to business ethics. In addition, it aims at introducing a framework for the evaluation of controversial issues in marketing practices in terms of business ethics. The analysis suggests that the use of sexuality and violence as marketing instruments in the mass media is unethical. All the business ethics theories examined support this conclusion. The deductions about the use of sexuality are stronger than the use of violence. Given the fact that the media institutions use sexuality and violence as a marketing instrument in order to attract more viewers or consumers, it means that the media companies are trying to market themselves or their products at the expense of ignoring business ethics.

Keywords: Business ethics, marketing, sexuality, violence, media

INTRODUCTION

Sexuality and violence in the media have been a matter for discussion among researchers. There have been a great number of studies about the effects of both concepts on individuals and society. Many researchers have criticized the media due to its pervasive use of pornography/sexuality and violence. To date the media have received harsh critiques from not only researchers but also other units in the society such as families, feminists, educators and religious institutions. There have been growing concerns about and critics toward the widespread sexual and violent content in the media. Despite all the critiques and concerns, sexuality and violence are still the most pervasive contents of the media. Considering the media institutions as a business establishment, we may argue that they are supposed to function in compatible with business ethics principles. Business ethics is a form of professional ethics that analyzes ethical principles and moral problems that arise in business environment. Therefore, business ethics theories must tell us something about the controversial applications of the media mentioned above. Unlike the extant literature on sexuality and violence in the media, this research considers these concepts as marketing instruments used by the mass media. Given the fact that the media institutions use sexuality and violence in order to attract more viewers or consumers, this research considers these two phenomena as marketing tools. The media institutions frequently embed sexual or violent scenes in their broadcasts. Sexuality and violence appear as an instrument in advertisements, shows, movies, news or in other broadcasts. Whatever the context is, both concept are used as marketing instruments, which are expected to attract more viewers.

The main purpose of this study is to determine whether the use of sexuality and violence by the media institutions is ethical according to business ethics theories. In other words, this paper seeks to analyze what business ethics theories tell us about sexuality and violence in the media. For this purpose, it evaluates the subject matters in the lights of some fundamental business ethics theories. In addition, it aims at introducing a framework for the evaluation of controversial issues in marketing practices in terms of business ethics. In this respect, it firstly offers a brief review of literature on sexuality and violence in the media and their effects on individuals and society. Secondly, it examines some business ethics theories to determine what they tell us about the sexual and violent contents in the media. In other words, it examines some business ethics theories to determine whether it is ethical for the media to use sexuality and violence as a marketing instrument. Thirdly, it offers a framework to be used in the ethical analysis of controversial issues in firms' marketing practices. Finally, it discusses the contributions, limitations and implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexuality in the Mass Media

The use of sexuality in the mass media has been among the most controversial issues in communication studies. Not only researchers but also parents, religious institutions and women associations have raised their criticisms against the media due to its pervasive sexual and pornographic contents. Women frequently appear in the media as a sexual object that exists to satisfy men's sexual desires. They are used as a marketing instrument mostly in advertisements.

The ways in which women are generally portrayed in the media have been the focus point of many feminist media researchers (Byerly and Ross 2006). It is argued that pornography or

sexuality is a form of sexual inequality in which women serve as a sexual instrument to arouse and satisfy men (Van Zoonen 1994). Feminists consider pornography “the ultimate cultural expression of men’s hatred against women, simultaneously a source and a product of a deeply misogynistic society” (Van Zoonen 1994, p. 19). It was found that advertising, television, movies, news and other genres in Western nations, and those in Africa, Asia and Latin America underrepresent women, treating them as sex objects (Byerly and Ross 2006). Feminists argue that sexuality in the media harms women’s opportunity for equal rights, promotes sexual violence against them, degrades feminine role in the society and restricts them from the full exercise of their citizenship and participation in public life (Baker 2005; Richmond and Hartman 1982; Van Zoonen 1994).

Although feminists have put forth strong arguments and raised critical questions regarding sexuality and pornography in the media, they approach the issue in question from the feminist standpoint, ignoring other negative aspects of the subject matter. However, sexuality and pornography have many negative effects on individuals and society as well as those argued by feminists.

The problems with the abuse of women and sexuality in the mass media are various. They can be seen at both individual and societal level. It is difficult to determine all the possible problems and threats. Hence, this paper summarizes some of these problems, showing that why the subject matter is important and needs an evaluation in terms of business ethics theories. There are both empirical and theoretical bases for claiming a link between the use of sexuality in the media and individuals’ sexual and general attitudes and beliefs (Lanis and Covell 1995; Brown 2002). For example, exposure to sexuality has been found to increase older adolescents’ acceptance of non-marital sexual behavior (Brown 2002). In addition, it causes exaggerated estimates of the prevalence of more unusual and unethical sexual behaviors, less expectation of sexual exclusivity with partners, less concern about sexual child abuse, and concern about that sexual inactivity leads to a health risk (Zillmann 2000).

There are also both empirical and theoretical bases for claiming a link between sexuality in the media and individuals’ behavior. Research suggests a connection between viewing sexually-oriented stimuli and aggression and violence (Wilson and Moore 1979; Zillmann 2000; Allen, D’Allesio and Brezgel 1995; Emmers, Allen and Gebhardt 1995; Lanis and Covell 1995; Brown 2002). Exposure to sexually attractive stimuli increases males’ sexual aggression towards females (Zillmann 2000; Allen, D’Allesio and Brezgel 1995; Emmers, Allen and Gebhardt 1995; Lanis and Covell 1995), the inclination to commit rape (Zillmann 2000) and interpersonal violence (Brown 2002). Furthermore, it increases sexual callousness (Zillmann 2000). In addition, viewing sexual scenes may lead young individuals to have sexual relations (Stern and Handel 2001). All of these and other negative effects of exposure to sexuality can lead adolescents to consider that the institution of marriage is sexually confining, and that having a family and raising children are an unattractive prospect (Zillmann 2000).

Violence in the Mass Media

The literature review suggests that the use of violence is very pervasive in the mass media. We may encounter violence in a wide range of forms. Watching violence is a popular form of entertainment. Individuals like watching or reading news on violent crimes. News shows provide extensive coverage of violent crimes in order to increase the number of its viewers and their ratings (Felson 1996). In addition, people like watching movies including violence. They

also like watching fights between animals. Furthermore, children enjoy playing video games that include combat and fights. These examples demonstrate that individuals are frequently exposed to violence, which is proposed to have negative influences on individual behaviors.

The use of violence in the mass media has been a matter for discussion among researchers. Many researchers (Wood, Wong and Chachere 1991; Eron et al. 1972; Freedman 1986; Eron 1982; Scharrer 2006; Proman 2004; Murray 2008) have examined its possible effects on individuals and society, and found that it negatively influences individuals, particularly children. The findings suggest that exposure to media violence increases individual's aggression and violent behaviors (Anderson, et al., 2003; Wood, Wong and Chachere 1991; Eron et al. 1972; Freedman 1986; Felson 1996). Although studies on violence in the mass media have revealed unequivocal evidence, many of them have found that media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive and violent behavior in both immediate and long-term contexts (Anderson, et al., 2003). After the introduction of television in the American households, there occurred a significant increase in the number of violent crimes (Centerwall 1989). In the reviewed experiments conducted by Wood, Wong and Chachere (1991) children or adolescents were exposed to violent or control presentations and their post-exposure behavior was coded for aggression during spontaneous social interaction. In this study, exposure to media violence was found to significantly increase viewers' aggressive behavior when the findings were aggregated across studies, but the effect was not uniform across investigations. The experiments also found a sharp increase in aggressive behavior immediately after the exposure to violence, compared to control group exposed to non-violent media content. A survey revealed that subjects who were exposed to more violent media content are significantly more likely to be involved in self-reported violence and crime (Dahl and Vigna 2009). It was also reported that exposure to media violence increases individuals' anti-social behaviors (Felson 1996). In addition, research found a link between the highly publicized violent events and the number of homicide and suicide incidents. Philips (1983) found an increase in the number of homicides after highly publicized heavy weight championship fights.

The most negative effects of violent media content can be seen on children. It is argued that children tend to imitate the violence they watch on television, a process explained by social learning theory, which is a well-established approach in social psychology (Felson 1996). Social learning theory suggests that individuals learn by observation in social situations, and that they tend to act like those they observe even without external incentives (Burke, Marlow and Lento 2009).

ANALYSIS

This section examines Kantian, Utilitarian, Aristotelian and Contractarian Approaches to business ethics, respectively, in order to determine what they tell us about the media's use of sexuality and violence as a marketing instrument and decide whether it is ethical or not. In addition, it introduces a framework for the evaluation of controversial issues in marketing practices in terms of business ethics.

Deductions from Kantian Approach

According to Kantian Approach, the only good or ethical behavior is an action of the will freely motivated for the right reason (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2004). Kant argues

that other good things such as wealth, beauty and intelligence may become bad when they are used for only selfish ends (Donaldson and Werhane 1999, p. 7). A purely good and free act of the will is one that is done merely because one has the right reason for doing it. Therefore, actions are ethical if they are done for the sake of what is right. According to Kant, “One ought only to act such that the principle of one’s act could become a universal law of human action in a world which one would hope to live” (Donaldson and Werhane 1999, p. 7). Bowie (1998) argues that if market interactions violate this principle, they will be morally impermissible.

According to Kant, “One ought to treat others as having intrinsic value in themselves, and not merely as means to achieve one’s ends” (Donaldson and Werhane 1999, p. 8). Bowie (1998) claims that this principle provides the basis for a more robust theory of moral obligation in personal market interactions. He also suggests that all individuals in a market transaction must be treated with respect.

Considering Kant’s general approach, we can claim that the media’s use of sexuality and violence as a marketing instrument is an unethical behavior. It is clear that the media institutions abuse sexuality in order to attract more viewers, that is, for only selfish ends. In the mass media, women are frequently used as a sexual object that exists to satisfy men’s sexual desire. In other words, the media institutions treat women merely as a means to achieve their goals. It is clear that the media institutions do not have the right reason for doing so. Furthermore, they do not treat women with respect in their marketing struggle. The media institutions also use violence in order to achieve their selfish ends, without considering the negative consequences they cause. Therefore, we can conclude that the use of sexuality in the mass media, according to Kantian Approach, is an unethical behavior. Furthermore, we can argue that the use of violence in the mass media is an unethical action, although the deductions are not as strong as those concerning the use of sexuality.

Deductions from Utilitarian Approach

Utilitarianism focuses on the results of human actions, and all human actions are assessed in terms of the desirability of their consequences (Donaldson and Werhane 1999, p. 3). It evaluates the actions or behaviors in terms of the extent they contribute to overall happiness (Audi 2007; Donaldson and Werhane 1999, p. 3). According to utilitarianists, ethically right acts are those that produce the greatest good or happiness for the greatest number (Burns and Hart 2005; Donaldson and Werhane 1999, p. 3; Audi 2007). An action is ethical if it maximizes the aggregate utility for the population that will be affected by the alternatives under considerations (Audi 2007; LaTour and Henthorne 1994). Therefore, this approach suggests that one should produce good or utility as much as he or she can and seek for the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Considering the main view of Utilitarianism and the negative consequences that exposure to sexuality and violence cause, we can argue that the media’s use of sexuality and violence as a marketing instrument is an unethical action. As discussed above, sexuality and violence in the mass media have many negative effects on individuals and society. While the use of sexuality in the mass media may negatively affect individual’s socialization process (Kaplan, 1966), attitude and behavior (Stern and Handel 2001; Brown 2002; Zillmann 2000), health (Brown 2002), physical and spiritual development (Lanis and Covell 1995; Brown 2002; Kaplan 1966), socio-cultural values and families (Smith, Haugtvedt and Jadrich 1995; Lanis and Covell 1995; Kaplan 1966), the use of violence may increase individual’s aggression, violent behaviors (Anderson, et

al. 2003; Wood, Wong and Chachere 1991; Eron et al. 1972; Freedman 1986; Felson 1996), anti-social behaviors (Felson 1996) and the number of homicide and suicide incidents (Philips 1983). Therefore, we can argue that sexuality and violence in the media cause pain or bring unhappiness to a great number of people. Furthermore, Utilitarians propose that a human's considerable unhappiness might outweigh the minor pleasures or happiness of many others (Donaldson and Werhane 1999, p. 4). The findings above clearly show that the problems resulting from the use of sexuality and violence outweigh the media's pleasure, which is to attract more viewers.

According to Utilitarianism, one should consider not only present, but also next generations and the long-term consequences of actions for single individuals (Donaldson and Werhane 1999, p. 4). The negative effects of sexuality and violence in the extant literature clearly show that the media institutions do not take into account the next generations and the long-term consequences of their actions.

Deductions from Aristotelian Approach

Aristotelian Approach suggests that the measure to judge whether an action is ethical or not is whether or not the action is compatible with one's inherent human capacities (Donaldson and Werhane 1999, p. 10). Therefore, actions or behaviors that improve human capacities are good or ethical and those that deter human capacities from developing are bad unless they are the best among negative alternatives (Solomon 1992; Donaldson and Werhane 1999, p. 11). Aristotle proposes that human beings are born with the potential to become virtuous and practically wise, but they must go through the following stages in order to achieve these goals: They must develop proper habits during their childhood and acquire the practical wisdom when their reason is fully developed (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2007). Furthermore, he argues that business ethics should emphasize on recognizing the rights of others instead of having rights oneself (Solomon 1992).

As discussed above, exposure to sexuality and violence in the mass media has significant negative effects on children. Exposure to sexuality leads them to develop improper or bad sexual habits or inclinations (Stern and Handel 2001; Brown 2002; Zillmann 2000), negatively affecting their health (Brown 2002). Thus, it negatively affects their both mental and physical development. Exposure to violence leads them to develop aggressive and violent behaviors in both immediate and long-term contexts (Anderson, et al. 2003). Therefore, these two phenomena may deter human capacities from developing and inhibit individuals from becoming virtuous and practically wisdom. Considering these negative effects of sexuality and violence along with the main view of Aristotelian Approach, we can argue that the use of sexuality and violence as marketing instruments is unethical.

Deductions from Contractarian Approach

Contractarian approach emphasizes "consent of individuals" which is utilized to justify principles, policies and structures (Dunfee and Donaldson 1995). According to this approach, a citizen's obligation to obey the laws or rules can be grounded only in that citizen's consent to the authority of the laws or rules (Dunfee, Smith and Ross 1999). The defenders of this approach ask people to imagine a situation in which there are no laws, no conventions and no political state, and consider rational people come together to formulate principles, on which every rational

people would agree and which would be universal, in order to govern social communities in that state (Donaldson and Werhane 1999, p. 9).

Donaldson (1982) suggests that corporations must avoid any practice that systematically worsens the condition of a group in a society. Furthermore, he argues that corporations can survive only through the cooperation and commitment of society. This requires an implied agreement between firms and society (Dunfee, Smith and Ross 1999).

The extant research on sexuality and violence in the mass media shows that many people and institutions are troubled with the pervasive sexual and violent content of the media. This suggests that every rational human being would not agree on the principle “The media can use sexuality or violence as a marketing tool” or “The media institutions have the right to abuse sexuality or violence, if it brings money.” The deductions from the extant research suggest that most of the individuals and institutions would oppose to these kinds of principles. Therefore, a thought on which most of the population do not agree and which they fiercely oppose to cannot become a principle or a law. Thus, exploiting sexuality and violence to gain money, which systematically worsens the situation of a wide range of society, cannot become a principle and is clearly unethical in a just society.

A Framework for the Evaluation of Controversial Ethical Issues in Marketing Practices

This section introduces a framework for the evaluation of controversial issues in marketing practices in terms of business ethics. This framework is developed from the above discussion about the four business ethics approaches. It will serve as a guideline for the discussion of controversial ethical issues that may arise in marketing practices. In order to determine whether a particular marketing action is ethical, one needs to answer the below questions derived from the four business ethics approaches. If one of the answers to these questions contradicts what business ethics theories teach us about an ethical action, it will indicate that the marketer’s decision is problematic and probably unethical.

First, the Kantian Approach will ask us to answer the following questions when determining whether a marketing practice is ethical:

- Is the marketing practice an action of the will freely motivated for the right reason?
- Does the marketing practice serve only selfish-ends?
- Does the firm have the right reason to act in that manner?
- Can the principle of the marketing practice become a universal law of human action in a world one would hope to live?
- Does the marketing action violate any other moral principle?
- Does the firm treat any group in the society merely as a means to achieve its aim?
- Does the firm treat all individuals in the society with respect?

Second, the Utilitarian Approach will ask us to answer the following questions when determining whether a marketing practice is ethical:

- Does the marketing practice produce the greatest good for the greatest number among alternative actions?
- Does the marketing activity maximize aggregate utility for the population?
- Does the possible individuals’ unhappiness resulting from the marketing activity outweigh the firm’s happiness or pleasure?
- Does the firm take into account next generations and the long-term consequences of the activity?

- Does the marketing practice cause any major damage to people or organizations?
- Are the possible consequences of the marketing activity desirable?

Third, Aristotelian Approach will ask us to answer the following questions when evaluating a marketing practice in terms of business ethics:

- Is the marketing activity compatible with one's inherent human capacities?
- Does the activity improve human capacities or deter them from developing?
- Does the activity inhibit individuals from becoming virtuous and practically wisdom?
- Does the firm consider the larger community in which they participate?
- Does the firm consider recognizing the rights of others instead of having rights oneself?
- Does the marketing activity cause any conflict between firm's self-interest and the greater public good?

Finally, Contractarian Approach will ask us to answer the following questions when evaluating a marketing practice in terms of business ethics:

- Is there any contradiction between the marketing activity and widely accepted moral obligations and principles?
- Does the population consent to the firm's marketing practice?
- Does the activity violate the law?
- Is there any agreement among social agents on the marketing practice?
- Does the marketing activity violate individuals' rights?
- Does the action systematically worsen the condition of a group in a society?
- Would every rational human being agree on the principle of the marketing activity?
- Does the firm treat everyone in the society with equal respect?

CONCLUSION

This study aimed at determining whether it is ethical for the media institutions to use sexuality and violence as a marketing instrument. It sought to answer the research question by examining some fundamental business ethics theories, namely Kantian, Utilitarian, Aristotelian and Contractarian approaches to business ethics. The examination of these theories suggests that the use of sexuality and violence in the mass media as a marketing tool is an unethical practice. All the business ethics theories examined support this conclusion. The deductions about the use of sexuality are stronger than the use of violence. In other words, the conclusion about the immorality of the use of sexuality as a marketing instrument is stronger than the conclusion about the immorality of the use of violence. The deductions of this study argues that many media institutions are violating the fundamental ethical principles by using sexuality and violence. Given the fact that the media institutions use sexuality and violence as a marketing instrument in order to attract more viewers or consumers, it means that the media companies are trying to market themselves or their products at the expense of ignoring business ethics. This study also introduces a framework for the evaluation of controversial issues in marketing practices in terms of business ethics. This framework is developed from the analysis of the four business ethics approaches. It will serve as a guideline for the discussion of controversial ethical issues that may arise in marketing practices.

This study has implications for not only media institutions, but also firms. It suggests that the media institutions and firms, particularly marketers and advertisers, should consider the

ethical aspects of the use of women and sexuality as a marketing instrument. Furthermore, the media institutions should take into account the negative effects of the use of violence on society.

Future research may examine the generalizability and applicability of the deductions about the use of sexuality and violence and of the proposed framework. In addition, future research may examine whether there might be some situations in which the use of sexuality and violence can be acceptable. Furthermore, future research may examine how sexual and violent contents influence viewers' attitudes towards the media institutions. Finally, future researchers could examine other business ethics theories to determine whether it is ethical to use sexuality and violence as a marketing instrument.

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