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The price of beauty

Abstract

This case study shows that the beauty industry is often criticized. Billions of dollars are spent by consumers annually on appearance-enhancing products, ranging from cosmetics, skin lightening creams, cosmetic surgery and weight loss aids. This case study examines the ethical implications for marketers of such products and examines how society can help young children develop cognitive defences against the undesirable effects of advertising.

Learning outcomes

This case serves to highlight the role played by advertising in society and prompt discussion and learning about ethical issues in the beauty industry.

Introduction

How far would you go to attain beauty? Research has repeatedly shown that significant benefits accrue to those who are attractive such as social and personal power, self-esteem, and preferential treatment from others (Adams, 1977; Goldman and Lewis, 1977). Advertisers consistently use slim, physically attractive models to attract attention and strengthen the appeal of their advertisements and products. Beautiful models are used to promote a wide range of products ranging from cosmetics to cars. Not surprisingly, billions of dollars are spent each year on appearance-enhancing products. While most people want to look well, for others the

quest for beauty results in injury, disappointment or psychological harm. Advertisements often make products and services, such as cosmetic surgery, seem attractive and a quick and easy solution to one's problems. The list of products and services launched in the name of beauty and sexuality is growing each year: face lifts, fillers, anti-aging creams, Botox, breast augmentation, solariums, skin lightening, liposuction, cellulite removal and weight loss aids. The beauty industry is highly competitive and dozens of brands compete for the consumer's dollars. Yet feminists rail against the industry for re-affirming patriarchal view of women as sex objects.

Beauty is strongly associated with bodily shape and size. However, obesity is a major problem in the western world. Government health authorities are launching campaigns to encourage people to exercise more and eat healthier foods. The obsession with thinness has spawned a profitable weight loss industry. Weight loss ads are full of clichés: the classic testimonial from 'real people'; the thin person holding up their 'fat pants'; the stunning 'before-and-after' shots. It's all about selling hope and the prospect of transformation; in constructing the 'before and after' experience, the message of the weight loss companies is simple: we can transform you from an ugly duckling into a swan! However, agencies can be held liable for making fraudulent or misleading advertising claims. Making a promise that can't be kept, such "lose 20 kilograms in one week" constitutes unfair or deceptive trade practices. Claims made about the product or service, such as "40% reduction in cellulite appearance" must be substantiated and based on legitimate tests performed by professionals in the field. Using false demonstrations, trick photography or computer manipulation to enhance a product or service is considered unfair or deceptive practice. False testimonials are also unethical, such as implying that a product is

endorsed by an individual or expert who is not a bona fide user. Cynics often say that few people manage to keep the weight off. If they did succeed, then the weight loss organisations would be out of business, instead, they thrive because people fail.

In many European countries, tanned skin is associated with beauty, whereas in Asia, light skin is associated with beauty. In India, Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) companies, including Nivea, L'Oréal and P&G, are marketing skin lightening or bleaching products at the female market. Many Indians believe that fair skin is a sign of beauty. It is widely associated with modernity and upward mobility and there is a big market amongst urban professional women. Social researchers however have slammed beauty companies for promoting Western ideals of beauty and for using sophisticated marketing techniques to translate traditional prejudices concerning skin colour into aspirational values. Many advertisements associate a fair complexion with success and popularity. In 2012, an Indian company launched what it claims is the country's first vaginal 'rejuvenation and tightening' cream. In their promotional video (www.18again.com), they claim that it will make women feel 'like a virgin' again. The company's advertising strategy has attracted criticism from women's groups, who say the slogan reinforces taboos around pre-marital sex and reaffirms the traditional view that women should be virgins when they marry. Others state that the product cannot possibly work (Lawrence, 2012).

There has been a media backlash against such pressures on women to alter their appearance. The fashion industry, often accused of promoting the 'size zero' and the 'waif' look through their use of anorexic-looking models, have faced pressure from special interest groups to change their practices. Unilever was the first company to tackle the unrealistic ideals of beauty present in today's society. The ground-breaking

'Dove Campaign for Real Beauty' (see www.campaignforrealbeauty.com) delivers the message that women comes in all shapes and sizes and are inherently beautiful. This struck an emotional chord with its target market. Now ten years old, the marketers of Dove still believe that the campaign is fresh and relevant and will be around for a long time to come. The campaign was also copied by other leading companies (Bahadur, 2014). Cosmetics giant *Shiseido* advertised a shampoo brand, Tsubaki, in Japan with the slogan 'Japanese women are beautiful'. Procter and Gamble sponsored a 'Black is Beautiful' campaign in the US which was designed to foster dialogue about black women and the way they are portrayed in popular culture. A website (www.myblackisbeautiful.com) was set up to facilitate discussion.

Parents of young girls are increasingly concerned about the effects of advertising on their child's development. Dove followed up its *Campaign for Real Beauty* with a campaign called *Dove Evolution*. The advertising agency, Ogilvy and Maher, created a viral advertisement, which showed how a model's appearance was transformed by air-brushing. It was designed to expose the tricks of the trade that give rise to the glossy, beautiful images used in fashion shoots, films and commercials. This YouTube video gained more than 1.7 million views and attracted significant publicity, being a talking point in various TV talk shows (Neff, 2006). The video was a strong indictment of the social pressures faced by young girls to look good.

While the beauty and weight loss industries are often criticized for exploiting people's insecurities about their looks, the counterargument is that these industries simply satisfy an inherent, universal desire - the desire for people around the world to look their best and fulfil their needs for self-esteem and empowerment. Another argument

is that parents and social institutions play a role in enhancing children's sense of esteem and enabling them to make responsible choices as mature adults. Many schools offer media education programs to help children develop cognitive defences against the undesirable effects of advertising. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies are commonplace and big brands recognise that they have a role to play in society and have to respond to, and deal with, criticisms from the media and other stakeholders.

Summary

The beauty industry has come under attack for exploiting people's insecurities about their appearance and for contributing to the unrealistic nature of contemporary Western beauty standards. Dove was the first mainstream brand in the beauty industry to challenge the portrayal of woman in advertising. It started to promote 'real beauty' and exhorted women to love themselves and their imperfections. Practices such as marketing skin lightening creams are seen as strengthening traditional prejudices concerning skin colour. Unrealistic weight loss programs have been criticised for manipulating consumers and profiting from failure. This case shows that brands have a role to play in society and have to respond to, and deal with, criticisms from the media and other stakeholders.

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Discussion questions

1. What are the criticisms levelled at the beauty industry in the case study and are they justified?
2. What can marketers do to encourage a responsible way of promoting beauty or appearance-enhancing products to their target market?