Advertising Professionals’ Perceptions of the Impact of Gender Portrayals on Men and Women: A Question of Ethics?

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Advertising Professionals’ Perceptions of the Impact of Gender Portrayals on Men and Women: A Question of Ethics?

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This research investigates advertising professionals’ perceptions of how gender portrayals impact men and women and how these perceptions influence their strategic and creative choices. Two rounds of qualitative data were collected to examine these issues. Findings reveal professionals’ perceptions about women’s vulnerability and men’s immunity to the negative consequences of advertising, as well as the societal discourses and institutional dynamics that drive their business decisions. The authors detail four themes with regard to professionals’ conceptualizations of the influence of gender portrayals on consumers and the ethical considerations surrounding such images. Theoretical and managerial implications and consumer welfare ramifications are offered.

As one of the most visible tools of business and marketing, advertising is no stranger to social controversy and ethical critique (Beltramini 2003). The Gallup Honesty/Ethics in Professions poll has demonstrated that for more than 30 years the public has consistently ranked advertising professionals low on honesty and ethical standards (Gallup 2012), despite the fact that research has demonstrated them to be at least as ethical as, and on some measures more ethical than, the general public (Fraedrich, Ferrell, and Pride 1989). While scholars have responded to these concerns making ethics a mainstream topic in marketing and advertising research (e.g., Hyman, Tansey, and Clark 1994; Nill and Schibrowsky 2007), the literature on advertising ethics has addressed neither the wide range of problems faced by practitioners nor those faced by consumers (Hunt and Chonko 1987; Treise et al. 1994).

Drumwright and Murphy (2009, p. 85) conclude that, despite past scholarly work in advertising ethics, research is “thin and inconclusive in many important areas.” While many studies have examined ethics in advertising, much of this research is problem focused (e.g., tobacco advertising) and lacks theory building (Hyman, Tansey, and Clark 1994; Shaver 2003) or is focused on macroissues, such as advertising’s impact on society, neglecting the microissues often faced by advertising professionals (Drumwright and Murphy 2009). Further, while scholars have examined advertising professionals’ beliefs about ethical dilemmas (e.g., Drumwright and Murphy 2004, 2009; Fraedrich, Ferrell, and Pride 1989; Hunt and Chonko 1987; Moon and Franke 2000; Pratt and James 1994), none has specifically examined their perceptions of gender representations through an ethical lens. Consequently, despite pervasive criticisms of advertising’s treatment of gender (e.g., Kilbourne 1999), scholars studying advertising ethics, defined in previous work as “what is right or good in the conduct of the advertising function” (Cunningham 1999, p. 500), have focused little attention on the perceptions of the decision makers and curators of advertising as they develop gendered messages.

Our study seeks to bridge a “macro” concern identified as an important yet still underresearched area in previous literature (e.g., Cohan 2001), with “micro” issues faced by professionals. To this end, we ask the following research questions: What are advertising professionals’ perceptions of how gender portrayals impact male and female audiences? In what ways do ethics inform their creative and strategic choices regarding gender portrayals in advertising? Drawing on institutional theory, we argue that professionals’ perceptions occur within the context of broader institutional forces and are based largely on assumptions professionals hold about gender and vulnerability in society. Their beliefs and actions, as actors in the broader institutional system, are shaped within the organizations to which they belong and interact with and occur in the context of problems faced by practitioners nor those faced by consumers (Hunt and Chonko 1987; Treise et al. 1994).

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of a society where certain gender discourses prevail. We map these institutional dynamics to the manner in which advertising professionals make sense of ethical issues related to gender portrayals in advertising within their broader societal contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Advertising Professionals’ Perspectives

Scholars have pointed both to the paucity and importance of research on advertising professionals’ perspectives, echoing calls to strengthen research into the “epistemic culture” of advertising (Nyilasy, Canniford, and Kreshel 2013), or the ways in which professionals’ knowledge of advertising and consumers develops, disseminates, reproduces and evolves. Such understanding is important because advertising professionals hold theories about advertising which are heavily influenced by their own cultural knowledge and which affect the creative and strategic work they do (Nyilasy, Canniford, and Kreshel 2013; Nyilasy and Reid 2009). Hackley (2002) argues “institutionalized knowledge, cultural knowledge residing within advertising agencies” (p. 224) is important because it “mobilizes advertising’s potentiality as a vehicle of cultural meaning and, hence, in the aggregate, enables advertising as an ideological force” (p. 212).

Despite its importance, few studies have focused on the ethical perspectives of advertising professionals beyond scenario-based ethical dilemmas—a point noted as well by Drumwright and Murphy (2004, 2009). Existing research has demonstrated that they do perceive ethical problems in their daily work (Hunt and Chonko 1987), including ethical concerns over advertising messages (Rotzoll and Christians 1980). In particular, Shaver (2003) notes that moral reasoning involved in advertising decisions is often related to message content and delivery. Thus, creative and strategic decisions fall into this “critical ethical nexus” (Shaver 2003, p. 297), not the least of which are those decisions related to gender representations as some of the most commonly employed signifiers of social and cultural meaning. Given prior work demonstrating that this cultural knowledge and the organizational structures within which it is housed (i.e., the agency) are gendered (Alvesson 1998), we suggest it is an ethical imperative to understand how advertising professionals perceive gender portrayals and their effects on consumers within the context of their broader institutional environments.

Institutional Theory

While institutional theory can be applied at varying levels of analysis ranging from world systems to organizational sub-systems, we focus on the ethical conceptualizations of individual actors (i.e., advertising professionals) within the context of the advertising industry—one type of institution. Marketing scholars have used institutional theory as a framework to examine a range of domains, including consumption practices (Humphreys 2010), and to explore legitimacy among marginalized consumers (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). Institutional theory suggests that organizations are a means for signifying values (Scott 2008). Scott (2008, p. 24) defines institutions as “comprised of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life.” These three pillars in institutions have varying underlying philosophies and serve to explain, in part, how actors make choices. While some institutional theorists may emphasize one pillar over another, we demonstrate how all three institutional elements impact how ad professionals engage in the meaning-making process that ultimately guides their ethical behavior.

The first institutional element—the regulative pillar—is concerned with the setting, monitoring and sanctioning of rules, sometimes through the government, and often through a coercive mechanism. It can be embodied in either an informal manner or in a very formalized sense (e.g., legal system) and may be backed by powerful actors or those in a position of authority (Scott 2008). While this view of the institution portrays stability, it can evoke feelings of fear and guilt or innocence and incorruptibility among the institutional actors depending on the extent to which rules are obeyed (Scott 2008). Second, the normative pillar of institutions emphasizes the importance of values and norms in an overall normative system that defines the goals of an organization and “designates appropriate ways to pursue them” (Scott 2008, p. 55). Thus, actors are socially embedded beings driven by social obligation and appropriateness and may experience feelings of shame or honor depending on their adherence to the norms that are recognized (Scott 2008). In this manner, advertising professionals assume roles that entail certain responsibilities, privileges, and expectations for how to behave and values to uphold. Last, the cultural-cognitive pillar of institutions refers to shared understandings that make up social reality and influence the process of meaning making. Actors can be driven by shared conventions, take certain things for granted, and experience certainty and connection if there is an adherence to the common framework of understanding (Scott 2008). That is, ad professionals may turn to scripts or templates for action to guide their ethical conceptualizations and behaviors.

The three pillars of institutions provide differing sources of legitimacy, defined by Suchman (1995, p. 574) as assumptions that “actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system….” The bases of legitimacy include legal or quasi-legal sanctions for regulatory focused institutions, moral governance for normative focused institutions, and common frames of reference for cultural-cognitive focused institutions. They provide the much-needed credibility and social acceptability that organizations need to survive (Scott 2008). In sum, it is clear that structures within advertising institutions legitimate certain ethical practices, which serve as guides for institutional actors (i.e., ad professionals) in their
creative and strategic decisions about gender portrayals in advertising.

Gender and Vulnerability

*Gender as a social resource.* According to Jhally (1987), “In modern advertising, gender is probably the social resource that is used most by advertisers. Thousands of images surround us every day of our lives that address us along gender lines. Advertising seems to be obsessed with gender and sexuality” (p. 135). However, advertisers continue to misunderstand and misrepresent gender by conflating sex, gender, and sexuality, utilizing outdated and inaccurate stereotypes (Dobscha 2012) and portraying unattainable standards (Zayer and Otnes 2012). Contemporary gender researchers tend to understand gender as a cultural construction that serves as a powerful ideological force (West and Zimmerman 1987), while sex is defined as the biological categories of male and female (Bettany et al. 2010). Butler (1999, p. 278) argues that “gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed.” That is, just as actors on a stage, gender is an act performed for others (Goffman 1979). In pointing to gender as an ideological force, West and Zimmerman (1987) note an opposing perspective to gender as cultural construction, one that presents an essentialized dichotomy of maleness and femaleness. The authors argue cultural activities legitimize social structures that make this essentialized dichotomy in society seem natural. These understandings are important because consumers make sense of their identities using messages in advertising and, therefore, scholars often examine gendered images with a critical lens (e.g., Bristor and Fischer 1995; Kacen and Nelson 2002).

The focus of this critique has centered on sex-role stereotyping, the prevalence of unattainable ideals, and objectification (e.g., Cohan 2001; Jhally 1987; Spence and Van Heereken 2005). Many of the studies in these categories focus on the impact on women of social comparison to models (e.g., Richins 1991) and outcomes such as negative spokesperson evaluation (Bower 2001). Other research examines the prevalence of certain derogatory images in media and advertising (Zimmerman and Dahlberg 2008), often through content analyses. These works are part of the broader discourse of problematic representations of women in media that have been highlighted by feminist voices (e.g., Friedan 1997; Kilbourne 1999). In fact, according to van Zoonen (1994, p. 67), “From its rebirth in the late 1960s, the women’s movement has singled out advertising as one of society’s most disturbing cultural products.”

*Women as vulnerable?* Early work by Goffman (1979) served to highlight the systematic ways in which men were portrayed in dominant and powerful positions relative to women in advertising. These discourses, generally portraying women as a “vulnerable” audience, draw from a legacy of gendered expressions of the marketplace (see Bristor and Fischer 1993). Historically, literature on vulnerability has tended toward definitions based on demographic characteristics, such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status (e.g., Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg 2005; Ringold 1995). As Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg (2005, pp. 128–129, 134) argue, definitions based on demographic characteristics influence perceived vulnerability, “a misconception that occurs when individuals project onto others what it is like to walk in their shoes” and fail to focus on actual vulnerability, or the “interaction of individual states, individual characteristics, and external conditions.” For instance, Tuncay and Otnes (2008) find that some men can be vulnerable in terms of their gender identities as they shop for fashion and grooming products because they not only feel that they do not have the social license or expertise to purchase these goods but also fear being ostracized and stigmatized. Although scholars have disputed the notion that women are inherently vulnerable (Bristor and Fischer 1995; Coleman 2012), within the framework of consumer theory vulnerability is rarely associated with maleness or male consumers as a category.

*Men as immune?* Recently, scholars have begun to highlight the narrow portrayals of men in advertising, such as limited depictions of fatherhood (Gentry and Harrison 2010). Other scholars detail the problematic nature of images that are salient in today’s advertising campaigns, such as the prevalence of violence in humor advertising portraying men (Gulas, McKeage, and Weinberger 2010) or of sexist portrayals of men (Kacen and Nelson 2002). Importantly, while previous research has focused on how women engage in social comparison to ads, recent research has demonstrated that men compare themselves to advertising ideals and may experience feelings of inadequacy, negative self-perceptions, or vulnerability as a result (Gulas and McKeage 2000; Zayer and Otnes 2012). For instance, Zayer and Otnes (2012) find that while some men report feeling that images of masculinity are aspirational, some experience anxiety about living up to societal standards. Thus, while it is clear that men, at least in some cases, do make comparisons to advertising depictions, scholars to date have not attended specifically to how or if advertising professionals perceive ethical dilemmas that involve male consumers at all. In fact, Gulas, McKeage, and Weinberger (2010, p. 118) specifically call for an examination of the “institutional dynamics” behind ads that denigrate men.

*Bridging the gender gap.* While macrolevel discussions of stereotypical representations of women has focused on discourses of women as particularly vulnerable and men as immune to these appeals, there is a paucity of research on how advertising professionals navigate the microlevel decisions of their daily practice. In particular, we examine advertising professionals’ ethical perceptions of gender representations and how these affect their creative and strategic decisions. In exploring such issues, we acknowledge the important role of societal discourses and advertising institutions, using institutional theory as a framework for our study.
METHODOLOGY
To investigate how advertising professionals, within the context of advertising institutions, perceive the impact of advertising on male and female audiences, a qualitative approach, consisting of semistructured and unstructured interviews, a focus group, and field observations, was used in two rounds of data collection. We follow the tradition of past research examining advertising professionals’ views on ethics (e.g., Drumwright and Murphy 2004, 2009), because it provides in-depth understanding of the experiences of advertising professionals in their own words. Thus, rather than seeking representation in the broader population, this research reveals a range of responses through the experiences of the advertising professionals who participated in the study. The researchers collected data from advertising professionals working in a range of roles. As Cronin (2004, p. 351) points out in her cultural analysis of advertising professionals in the United Kingdom, much research has “a disproportionately intense focus on Creatives” and neglects the perspectives of others within the ad industry. Because past research has found that age and length of experience in agencies can impact ethical decision making (Davis 1994), informants included in the study varied in age (early 20s to mid-50s), industry experience (up to more than 25 years of experience), and rank (e.g., entry level, middle management, senior executive). Collectively, informants had experience working on a range of consumer accounts—from alcohol, auto, clothing, and beauty to home improvement products. While informants did not receive monetary compensation for participation, they received follow-up thank-you notes or small, post interview tokens of appreciation. All informants were assured confidentiality individually and for their agencies.

In the first round of data collection, one of the authors was allowed access to a large advertising agency (in terms of number of employees) in the United States, which is part of a global advertising network. She was fully immersed for two weeks in the day-to-day operations of a team of advertising professionals, including shadowing employees and attending meetings. The researcher conducted semistructured and unstructured interviews ranging from 30 minutes to one and a half hours with a total of 15 individuals of different rank and working in a broad range of agency functions, including client services, creative, production and account planning. During the semistructured interviews, informants were asked “grand tour” questions (McCracken 1988), as well as focused questions on the use of gender in advertising, and if and how they believe gender portrayals impact male and female consumers. In addition to interviews, the researcher moderated a semistructured focus group with five individuals. Like the interviews, the focus group started with broad questions on representations of gender in advertising and then probed more specifically into portrayals of gender and its impact on consumers. The in-depth interviews and the focus group were taped and transcribed. For other data points, such as the unstructured interviews and field observations, the researcher took detailed field notes during and immediately following the interactions. In total, more than 100 single-spaced pages of text and field notes were generated. Limitations of the first round of data collection were its focus on one agency and that, much like the background of executives in the advertising industry, the informants in our sample were mostly male and Caucasian.

In the second round of data collection, the authors sought out a broader range of individuals, conducting ten semistructured depth interviews with advertising professionals working at eight different agencies across the United States in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and the Dallas metroplex. Using guidelines detailed in the Advertising Red Books: Agencies 2013, agency classifications varied. More specifically, three informants worked in small stand-alone agencies, three informants worked in medium-sized stand-alone agencies, one informant worked in a medium-sized global agency, and three informants worked in large global agencies. Informants in this round were more racially and ethnically diverse and included four women. The agency functions represented were client services, creative, media, and account planning. The researchers gained access to the informants through industry contacts or referrals from colleagues. Interviews were conducted in person when possible and via Skype and telephone. All interviews were taped and transcribed. The second round of data collection served to assess whether the initial findings were salient across different agencies and across geographic regions. More important, the second round interviews were conducted at much greater length and depth, with interviews lasting between one and two and a half hours, yielding more than 225 single-spaced pages of transcript text. This allowed the researchers to examine in greater depth the ethical considerations of advertising professionals and reasons behind some of the gender disparity in how practitioners perceive possible negative consequences of advertising images. That is, as in the first round of data collection, both broad and focused questions regarding gender representations in ads and their impact on consumers were discussed. However, in the second round, the researcher further probed informants about their gendered conceptualizations, how these notions may affect the ad creation and presentation process, and any potential challenges or conflicts the informants may have encountered in their roles. Responses to these questions provided more insight into meaning-making processes of ad professionals. The researchers ceased recruitment of informants when the data reached a point of saturation.

Similar to the qualitative method of analysis used by Drumwright and Murphy (2004), the researchers began with open coding to identify possible themes in the data, including interview transcripts and field notes. Through this process, researchers independently sought emergent themes in the text while also referring back to the literature, a process
called dialectical tacking (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Researchers then worked together to identify convergent themes, which were organized into categories and subcategories, in preparation for the next stage of analysis. Through axial coding, the researchers reread the transcripts multiple times to discover relationships between the categories and subcategories identified through open coding. Finally, the core concepts were identified out of the process of selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Through selective coding, the researchers converged on the most salient themes, finding similarity among the informants’ responses in both rounds of data collection, although deeper insights resulted from the more in-depth interviews conducted in the second round. In the following sections, we present our findings and discuss them in light of the institutional theory framework. (Please note for purposes of confidentiality, only the pseudonym and sex of the informant is attributed in the presentation of informant quotes).

FINDINGS

Our research investigates two central research questions: What are advertising professionals’ perceptions of how gender portrayals impact male and female audiences? In what ways do ethics inform their creative and strategic choices regarding gender portrayals in advertising? Our data reveal varying conceptualizations by ad professionals with regard to the ethical issues surrounding gendered advertising images. Specifically, for each conceptualization, we outline three interrelated dimensions: (1) the extent to which ad professionals perceive that gendered messages can be problematic, (2) the ethical lens applied by these professionals (if at all), and (3) the nature of professionals’ responses within their institutions.

First, we find that the informants we interviewed vary in the extent to which they recognize that gendered images can negatively impact audiences. Next, informants vary in terms of the ethical lens they apply in the workplace. Some informants do not consider ethical issues, while others feel a deep moral responsibility. Last, informants vary in terms of their responses in the workplace. These responses include remaining silent, setting boundary conditions, taking action so long as it is commensurate with their career goals, or serving as a leader in the ethical meaning-making process. While some informants express concern about the use of gendered images in advertising, external pressures impede any behavioral responses in the workplace. On the other hand, other informants are more apt to assert ethical standards in the creation of gendered ad images. In sum, these three dimensions serve as a foundation for differentiating the four salient themes that emerged from our data. Differentiation is an important theoretical contribution in that it “add[s] insight by distinguishing, parsing, dimensionalizing, classifying, or categorizing an entity (e.g., construct, theory, domain) under study” (MacInnis 2011, p. 145).

Silent Professionals

The potential that gender portrayals in advertising can be problematic for audiences (e.g., by reinforcing gender role stereotypes or setting unrealistic standards related to gender) is not on the day-to-day radar of silent professionals in our study. Even when probed specifically about how men and women are portrayed in ads, they do not highlight ethical considerations or do so only as minor considerations. Consequently, ethics do not drive the creative and strategic choices they make with regard to gender portrayals in ads. This category aligns with the “moral myopia,” defined as a “distortion of moral visions that prevents moral issues from coming into focus,” identified previously by Drumwright and Murphy (2004, p. 7). Some informants in our study either did not feel advertising contains derogatory images of men or women or deflected responsibility by referring to regulatory forces and rules within their institutions. For example, Aubry, male, relies on the regulatory elements in advertising institutions as he explains his trust in the media system to filter out negative images in ads: “There’s not a lot of derogatory [ads] out there because the [television] networks won’t let it happen.” Aubry can abdicate any personal responsibility with regard to ethics, because he perceives legitimate structures are already in place and thus he can claim “innocence” in the process (Scott, 2008, p. 51).

Similarly, when asked about being in the role of a creator of images in pop culture, another male informant, Erin, states: “I’m definitely not concerned with influencing anyone that way. I’m more focused on answering [the] brief . . . the funniest, most entertaining, most compelling way to do it. I just want to do good work . . . I want to give [clients] what they want . . . something that goes in my book.” Here, Erin is concerned with gaining incentives that go hand in hand with following the well-established rule of giving the client “what they want.” Indeed, some advertising and marketing professionals choose business decisions that maximize personal, rather than social, welfare (Castleberry, French, and Carlin 1993). In sum, silent professionals often defer to regulatory forces and rules in their institutions to guide their behavior and lack personal ethical cognizance and action with regard to gendered messages.

Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus

This theme captures the dichotomy that some ad professionals express in terms of how gendered messages may affect men and women. Some professionals in our study rely on stereotypical perceptions of men and women that cast women as particularly vulnerable and therefore in need of protection and men as immune to media influence. They reflect historically dominant perceptions of vulnerability defined along demographic variables. These informants clearly not only draw from discourses of gender and vulnerability in society but they also rely on the taken-for-granted notions of gender prevalent in their institutions, exemplifying a characteristic of the cultural-cognitive force within institutions (Scott 2008).
ethic lens applied by these professionals and the consequent responses are limited in scope and vary according to perceptions of the audience as male or female.

Women as protected, men as immune. Our data suggest that many advertising professionals, at times, recognize the negative impact that some gender portrayals can have and they do display an ethical concern; however, their perceptions hold true for female audiences only. For example, during a visit to an agency, one of the researchers attended a creative review meeting where an ad script was read in which a joke was made about a woman. Immediately after, both the female researcher and a female advertising professional were consulted to ensure the ad was not offensive or demeaning. In other instances, the use of certain creative tactics, such as humor at the expense of women, in advertising was avoided. Moreover, several informants display concern regarding the use of sex appeal or body ideals, although their concern is often guided by either strategic considerations or the belief that women are more “sensitive.” Within our study, ad professionals do not conceptualize vulnerability as a state of being influenced by an interaction of variables (Baker, Gentry, and Rittenburg 2005) but as something attributed only to women (or minorities, etc.). Indeed, regarding consumers in particular, Ringold (1995, p. 584) defines vulnerability as a “diminished capacity to understand the role of advertising, product effects, or both.” Thus, while the awareness of women’s issues in advertising is refreshing, these professionals maintain a dualism portraying women as vulnerable and men as immune to the effects of gendered images and messages.

This lack of acknowledgment among some informants that men are negatively impacted by gendered ad depictions is deeply institutionalized, even in cases where they recognize that, at times, stereotypical images of men are used (e.g., “womanizer” and “stupid dad”). During a focus group of five individuals, a male informant discusses how men are less “complex” and want to be entertained by advertising “even if it’s at the expense of themselves.” Another man adds, “It is a lot easier to pick on guys than the girls.” When probed as to why that was the case, the informant states that men “are generally less sensitive.” Another male informant, Pat, also feels that men would not likely be impacted or offended by ads: “[If] women see even themselves objectified in advertising— that maybe would cause a stronger aversion to something than if men…[had] been picked on.” When probed by the researcher, he explains, “Maybe it’s just gender differences.” Pat’s inability to articulate his beliefs in more depth may signal a reliance on taken-for-granted notions that often operate at an unconscious level (Scott 2008).

Thus, our informants often saw men as immune to the influences of advertising; when an impact was recognized, it was often discounted due to sex or gender differences (some informants used gender interchangeably with sex) based on stereotypical notions. That is, by ascribing certain essentialized characteristics to men (e.g., “less sensitive,” “less complex,” “tough”) and others to women (e.g., “sensitive”), it gave some professionals license to avoid recognition that some advertising images may negatively impact male audiences while attributing greater influence of gender portrayals on women. Indeed, while acknowledging that gender is an important part of identity, scholars have warned of the problems that arise in assuming commonality of characteristics and experiences based on gender (Bristor and Fischer 1995). In sum, these dichotomous perceptions, rooted in both societal discourses and cultural-cognitive institutional forces, led to a narrow ethical perspective and inaction on the part of ad professionals with regard to responsible gender portrayals of men in advertising. With regard to portrayals of women, there was increased self-regulation among ad professionals.

Talk the Talk

Informants who talk the talk demonstrate awareness that advertising images may negatively affect both male and female audiences. However, the recognition that some gender portrayals may be problematic was largely due to strategic considerations rather than ethical concern or a sense of empathy for consumers. These ad professionals’ responses were largely driven by external advertising institutions, such as clients, media and media agents in the marketplace, or possible backlash from consumer groups. The influence of various institutional forces emerges in the responses of individuals in this category—informants sometimes behave in accordance with regulative elements in their institutions (e.g., averting legal issues); other times they draw on cultural conventions in their agencies to guide their behaviors. And still at other points, they draw on norms about what is right and wrong, although they may not act on them. Indeed, institutional forces and their associated sources of legitimacy often work in combination (Scott 2008), and this is evident in our data as well—particularly in this category of responses.

One female informant, Jordan, displays some awareness of how ads may negatively affect both men and women, particularly as they pertain to traditional gender roles. However, the driving force behind her actions in the workplace are concerns about adherence to regulatory practices (i.e., averting “a legal issue”) and following agency and client protocols rather than an empathetic understanding of how such images may impact consumers. Jordan states, “First and foremost, we look how it’s going to reflect on [agency name] and . . . we always look internally to . . . what’s the manifesto of the brand, the manifesto is what are these guidelines that we have to follow that our client approves.” Similarly, a male informant, Morgan, addresses some limited cases in which both male and female consumers compare themselves to advertising images: “I guess I think we’re handcuffed . . . [it is] your research of
demographic data and what the client wants." He cites the power of “mommy bloggers,” women’s shopping power, and consumer backlash as reasons for his concern about consumers’ reactions to ads.

Interestingly, one female ad professional recognizes that some advertising portrays men in a negative light but feels powerless to change anything: “[There’s] nothing I can do. I’m a woman... it’s all men [in charge].” In fact, when she did voice her concern, she was deemed a “sensitive woman.” Clearly, this informant feels she cannot overcome the power dynamics of the male executives in her agency and the shared cultural conventions that have set a precedent in the past—a culture that limits the agency of women. Indeed, past research has documented women’s inability to influence male gatekeepers in advertising (Windels and Lee 2012) as well as the masculine and homosocial culture of agencies (e.g., Nixon and Crewe 2004).

In summary, informants in this category seem to talk the talk, as they do recognize at varying levels that gendered images of both men and women can be problematic. However, they are not willing (or are unable) to take action if it conflicts with their career-related goals or would do so only insofar as they perceive it to be a strategic business decision. Their ethical lens is limited in scope and their responses are not driven by a concern for consumer welfare. Moreover, a combination of institutional dynamics—regulatory, normative, and cultural forces—and discursive elements come into play in shaping these professionals’ responses.

**Walk the Walk**

Although few in number, some informants not only recognized that advertising may negatively impact both men and women but also expressed a moral responsibility in making ethical advertising choices. They understand gender as socially constructed—that is, both men and women can be “sensitive” or “tough” and both can be vulnerable to advertising images, given certain contexts. Their responses are driven largely from their normative beliefs—beliefs that sometimes coincide with their institutions and beliefs that sometimes conflict with them. For example, Taylor, a female ad professional, demonstrates a sense of responsibility for representations because “as advertisers we have the opportunity to shape how people view certain things... I feel like we hold the power but I feel like we abuse it a lot.” She displays clear moral reasoning and a feeling of social obligation (Scott 2008) to behave in a certain manner, indicative of the normative forces in institutions. In fact, male informant Jaime discusses how ethics and the best interests of the clients are intertwined:

> We are responsible for putting images out there into popular culture and those can be perceived different ways by different people. I think we always want to be careful about what it is that we’re creating and disseminating. We of course would not want anything to have a negative impact on people... But I think that we have a responsibility to our clients too because [we are putting] them out into the popular culture and they want to look and seem a certain way.

Jaime displays behavior that is in line with his personal code of ethics and the ethical norms of his clients. In the interview, he also clearly articulates that both men and women may be negatively impacted by ad images.

One female informant, Lane, displays the most reflective empathy and ethical concern for bringing the consumer’s voice into the creative decision-making process, expressing clear boundaries of what is acceptable in terms of messaging and what is not: “I just think with boys there just hasn’t been as much of an issue made on what that looks like. Somehow it’s okay. It feels like no one wants to complain. I don’t know where that comes from.” In contrast to Jaime, Lane’s value system conflicts with the norms of her former employer, but she feels a sense of pride and honor (Scott 2008) in taking action in line with her personal code of ethics:

> There’s something inherent in marketing where you are playing to people, like you’re playing to people’s vulnerabilities. That’s just the inherent tension advertising has always lived in. Finding that right ethical balance... When I worked with [a prior agency], I was asked to put on the [brand X] kids’ business. I said ethically I decline. I think advertising to children is unethical... I told them if it was that big of a deal, then they could let me go.

In sum, these informants demonstrate the most nuanced understanding of advertising’s impact on both men and women. Individuals who walk the walk reflect the more developed moral perspective that Kohlberg (1976) discusses in his six-stage model of moral reasoning where individuals promote issues of justice, equality, and dignity rather than focus on strictly personal rewards. They have a clear sense of ethical considerations intertwined in their occupations and behave in a manner consistent with the normative beliefs they hold within the context of their institutions and society at large. Indeed, at times, informants’ responses are indicative of moral imagination, discussed by Drumwright and Murphy (2004, p. 17), of “envisioning moral alternatives that others do not.” Further, they discuss important sociocultural issues, like the lack of consideration for advertising’s potential influences on men due to discourses of gender in society and the positive influence of the women’s movement. Taken as a whole, our intention is not to label ad professionals as always molding to one category or another. While informants tend to display characteristic responses of one category, depending on the ethical dilemmas they face, they may shift their conceptualizations. It is possible that over time, and with more experience, professionals may refine their understandings and actions.
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Institutional theory develops the connections between organizations and their cultural environments, detailing that the values of an organization are legitimized by their link to broader normative societal structures (Scott 2008). By using institutional theory, we deepen our analysis of advertising professionals’ ethical decision making with regard to gendered depictions in ads and make a contribution to the field by providing a more holistic and contextual understanding of advertising ethics. Specifically, we detail how these professionals legitimize their ethical perceptions and activities by adhering to the legal, moral, and cultural boundaries set by these institutions (Scott 2008). We also highlight how they draw from and are influenced by various broad institutional forces such as their clients, media, and regulatory bodies, in addition to forces within their own agencies. Figure 1 demonstrates the connections to macroforces that emerged in our informants’ responses regarding gender-related ethical concerns.

In particular, the distinct gender dynamics of agencies and ways of “doing gender” (Alvesson 1998; Windels and Lee 2012) promote a culture of masculine hedonism and homosociability (Nixon and Crewe 2004), and an environment where toughness and a need for thick skin are necessary (Grow and Broyles 2011). As Gulas, McKeage, and Weinberger (2010) highlight, most creative directors are Caucasian males and are typically “licensed” to make fun of that group in ways that outsiders are not (Gilbert 2004). In fact, while our informants worked in a range of roles, as Windels and Lee note (2012, p. 506), “Creatives learn to develop the type of work that is validated and rewarded by the social system.” In this vein, we find in our study that some ad professionals adhere to institutional norms and shared understandings in their agencies that promote hegemonic masculine discourses, particularly as regulation with regard to gender portrayals in advertising is lacking.

We also find that just as institutions operate within broader cultural discourses, advertising professionals in our study, as actors within this system, conceptualize the impact of gendered advertising images on men and women in ways that largely mirror dominant societal discourses about gender and vulnerability. Masculine ideals suggest that men are stoic, powerful, show little emotion, and should be resistant to pain, while women are stereotyped as sensitive (Fischer and Arnold 1994;}

![FIG. 1. Theoretical framework. Advertising institutions operate within broader discourses in society, including discourses of gender and vulnerability. Individual actors in the system draw from such discourses and, through the output of their work—images and messages of gender that audiences consume—reiterate and reinforce (sometimes challenge) discourses. Institutional sources of legitimacy set boundaries and inform ad professionals’ conceptualizations and responses regarding gender portrayals. Sometimes ad professionals conform to or internalize institutionalized forces that perpetuate stereotypical depictions of gender and perceptions of vulnerability among women. Other times, though rarely, they challenge such notions. While the impact of ad institutions on societal discourses irrespective of actors was not explicitly explored, this warrants future examination.](image-url)
Harris 1995). Historical discourses of vulnerability based on demographic characteristics have not only dichotomized gender and positioned women as particularly vulnerable (Coleman 2012) but also reinforced conceptualizations of men as immune and women as susceptible to the influence of advertising. These dichotomous notions of gender and vulnerability inform not only the conceptualizations of the ad professionals in our study with regard to the impact of the gendered messages in advertising but also the creative and strategic decisions they make in the workplace. Ad professionals are not only cultural intermediaries but also consumers themselves (Cronin 2004), and thus we find our informants bring their own set of cultural assumptions and personal experiences to their jobs.

Moreover, we find ad professionals rely on varying institutional elements in shaping the ethics behind their decision making. While some professionals look to legitimize their practices by employing shared cultural frames or adhering to the moral governance salient in their firms, some are simply concerned with avoiding possible legal sanctions. Our analysis reveals that other entities and actors in the advertising industry, such as agency clients, media regulatory bodies, and even consumer groups impact the responses of these actors. Finally, as Humphreys (2010, p. 491) notes, media act not only as gatekeepers (McCracken 1986) and agents of persuasion but also as a “constitutive part of the legitimation process.” Through the output of their work—images and messages of gender consumed by the masses—ad professionals reiterate and reinforce (sometimes challenge) discourses of gender and vulnerability. As we look to the future of advertising ethics, we recognize the view of institutions as “process” (Scott 2008) and are hopeful that these institutions can undergo change. As Scott (2008, p. 52) points out, “Institutions work both to constrain and empower social behavior.” It is this notion of empowerment that we see in some of the professionals we interview and hope to bring this discussion to the forefront as we outline implications for advertisers and marketers. Institutions such as the advertising field, as well as individual agencies, should work toward promoting greater understanding of the taken-for-granted notions of gender and vulnerability that inform ad professionals’ day-to-day decision making. We find some ad professionals hold themselves accountable as part of a larger cultural system of values. Although institutions are resistant to change, cultural understandings within institutions can fluctuate and be challenged (Scott 2008). Moreover, management can be a critical force in managing sources of legitimacy and defining legitimate activities (Suchman 1995). Key leaders in advertising institutions can serve to define and disseminate norms and values that prioritize consumer welfare. We observed concern among some professionals about how women are affected by ads, reflecting the language of advertising critiques. However, just as with women, men can be negatively affected by ads through lowered self-esteem or feelings of inadequacy (e.g., Gulas and McKeage 2000; Zayer and Otnes 2012). Thus, while we recognize women face substantial structural inequities, discussions about gender, both in academics and in business, must be expanded to address issues that directly affect men as well to highlight all inequities and move us forward conceptually.

The initial responsiveness and awareness among some professionals suggests an opportunity for practitioners and researchers to take an active role in addressing constructions of audience vulnerability and influencing consumer welfare. Scholars have an obligation to advocate on behalf of consumers to ad professionals that men are not immune to the influence of advertising; nor are women always vulnerable. Given that we see evidence in our data of professionals’ awareness of the possible negative influences of gender portrayals on women, due in part to feminist scholarship and activism on this topic, we call for a sustained critique of these issues. This can be particularly powerful if scholars can connect with key influencers in advertising institutions demonstrating the impact of gender portrayals on consumers, as well as how responsible advertising is commensurate with sound business practice. In turn, advertisers must go further in their recognition of the ethics of gender as it pertains to women and men, and they must reconcile these considerations with their desires to develop creative ads and/or meet client needs. Without such practices, advertisers risk reiterating outdated gender roles and perpetuating an ad culture where consumer welfare is not a priority. Changes must also occur within the context of agency culture itself, as it serves as a catalyst for perpetuating stereotypical notions of gender and limited understandings of vulnerable audiences. All of these elements—individual actors, agency and institutional norms, as well as taken-for-granted notions in society regarding gender and vulnerability—serve as an iterative force which (re-)creates problematic mass-consumed images and stifles progress in fostering ethical decision making.

Moreover, advertising and media have only a moderate level of regulation relative to other industries such as medicine and law such that “professional guidelines and codes tend to be less specific, sanctions—aside from public opinion—tend to be weak or non-existent, and there are fewer or no enforcement procedures at the group or professional level” (Shaver 2003, p. 294). There are no structured means by which ethical standards with regard to gendered messages are systematically enforced in advertising beyond self-regulation, and ethics is seldom discussed in terms of responsible ad messages (Drumwright and Murphy 2009). Greater understanding of the misguided use of gender portrayals can serve as a first step in creating responsible advertising messages and established codes of behavior. Recent examples of consumer backlash in response to stereotypical ad messages (e.g., “Have Dads Put Huggies to the Test” campaign; see Harrison 2012) highlight how the creation of responsible messages is commensurate with sound business practice. As Drumwright and Murphy (2004) note, advertisers can be successful while at the same time being ethically cognizant.
In sum, scholars have long pointed out how advertising acts as a socializing agent and has a powerful impact on the values of society (Cohan 2001). Thus, if as a society we hope to move beyond restrictive gender roles and their related consequences, we must reflect these values in our advertising and in the institutions and among the individual actors who create such images. We bring to light the gender dichotomy, as well as the range of ethical responses, that ad professionals express with regard to the gendered images that are used in advertising campaigns. We hope to move professionals toward a greater understanding and more responsibility in targeting women and men.

FUTURE RESEARCH

We have detailed how discourses of gender and vulnerability within our informants’ narratives and the institutional structures in which they reside shape both their conceptualizations and the creative and strategic choices they make with regard to gender portrayals in advertising. Future research may seek to uncover other powerful discourses, such as that of agency or empowerment among different actors and different institutions. Some informants expressed a lack of agency in a male-dominated culture or due to client demands. A deepened understanding of how these tensions can be managed would advance an agenda of enhanced ethical decision making. Moreover, notions of gender do not stand alone; they intersect with ideologies surrounding race, ethnicity, class, and age, among other elements. How do these discourses impact the perspectives of ad professionals as they engage in the creative and strategic development process? Cronin (2004) notes many agencies have a decidedly white, male, middle-class, heterosexual perspective. Indeed, most of the participants of the first round of data collection in this study were male, posing a limitation on our findings. We worked to minimize this limitation in the second round of data collection by recruiting nearly equivalent numbers of men and women. A nuanced understanding of how the diversity of an ad team (both demographically and in diversity in thought) affects the ad creation process is an important area for further research.

Next, a more in-depth investigation of the influence of rank and agency size and structure (e.g., small versus large-sized agencies; stand-alone versus global agency networks) on the ethical conceptualizations of ad professionals may be needed. While we interviewed informants of different rank and from a range of agency types and structures, we did not seek to compare differences between entry-level employees and senior executives or across agency classifications. Moreover, our research examines ethical considerations of ad professionals among a group of nine agencies in a snapshot in time. Future research may seek to conduct longitudinal studies of how conceptualizations of gender portrayals and ethical considerations develop over time not only within different agency cultures but also among individuals as they move forward in their careers.

Last, our research raises the question of how best to initiate change among advertising institutions in a manner that encourages responsible representation of both men and women. Further research should explore which resources and interventions, such as greater education or working with key influencers, might be effective in bringing about social and institutional change in the long-term. For instance, brands such as Pantene, Always, and Under Armour have recently presented notions of female empowerment and themes of feminism in their advertising campaigns. Are these recent campaigns reflective of a sustained cultural shift in agencies? Are consumers demanding such messages—and are these messages interpreted by consumers as empowering or simply perceived as “pinkwashing” (Zmunda and Diaz 2014)? Future research should seek to determine the cultural underpinnings and the potential institutional structures in the advertising industry that led to the creation of these campaigns and the extent to which these campaigns indeed embody and imbue feminist values.

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