

SUBLIMINAL MESSAGES AND UNETHICAL ILLUSTRATIONS ON THE PRODUCT PACKAGINGS DESIGNED FOR CHILDREN

İbrahim Gökhan CEYLAN¹

¹Assoc. Prof. Dr., Sinop University, Gerze Vocational School, Department of Design, ORCID: 0000-0002-6692-8827

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ABSTRACT

The advertisements prepared in different types in the mass media, which act as a bridge between the consumer and the product, position the persons as consumers not according to their own will, but based on the consciousness imposed by the advertiser. The most effective method for this positioning involves various illustrations intended to address the emotions of the child consumers with an open perception. In the product sections, we may sometimes come across the packagings supported by the illustrations, which solely target the sale and do not directly represent the product inside. To that end, first the subject was scrutinized from a theoretical perspective and then the uses of subliminal messages and unethical illustrations on the packaging designs were examined. As a result of the study, it was found out when the illustrations included on the packaging of many domestic and foreign brands were examined that the illustrations do not relate to the packaging contents and do not reflect the product, that the only concern of the illustrations is to convince the costumer into buying the product, and that the implicit messages, which would cause the child consumers to be negatively affected, are included in the illustrations. This study is important for heightening the awareness of the design students about the need to stay away from the misleading and negative messages and to sensitively approach the issue of the ethical violations when performing their works as well as heightening the awareness of the parental consumers about the unethical messages to which their children are exposed.

Keywords: Packaging, Ethics, Illustration, Advertisement, Subliminal Message

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Introduction

Today, the companies have deviated from the conventional methods of product marketing. Significant changes have occurred in the policies they adopt, whereby they have used also the emotions of the consumers as a marketing strategy, in addition to the consumers' purchasing power and the consumers' need for products (Darıcı, Ceylan & Ceylan, 2020, p. 1343).

For this reason, the purchase of a product by the consumer is dependent on a packaging's being attractive. In such a crowded sales environment, the duration for which the design of a packaging remains in contact with the consumer is 2-3 seconds. The consumer either shows interest in or remains unresponsive to the product within this duration. The time for making a purchasing decision is 3-10 seconds (Ersoy, 2017, p. 939). Therefore, it is not very easy to attract the attention of the consumer in such a short time. First of all, the target audience to be addressed by the product should be determined. Then, the packaging should give the impression that it contains a quality product and should recall the entertainment if it is a product intended for the children; the packaging illustrations should be determined accordingly. However, it is necessary to pay attention to the ethical rules when doing all these. Although the deceptive images that attract the attention of the child consumers but do not reflect the product contents can enable instant sales, they generate an environment of distrust for the company as well as for the society. Consequently, it is necessary to have comprehensive knowledge of the concepts of ethics and morality in order to be able to approach the images critically.

In this study, first the concepts of morality, ethics, and advertising ethics will be described, and then, the unethical illustrations and the deceptive images on the product packagings intended for the children will be examined.

Method and Data Analysis

The survey model was used for the theoretical information on the topics of the advertising ethics and of the subliminal messages and unethical illustrations on the product packagings intended for the children. It is possible to utilize the survey model for identifying the past situations or the ongoing situations. The descriptive research is employed for the purpose of assessing a large amount of data in a certain time so that the situations of the institutions or groups may be revealed in a detailed manner (Kaptan, 1995, p. 59). The situation analysis technique was also employed in this study in order to scrutinize the subject. The study was limited to 5 packaging design images that contain deceptive and unethical messages.

1. Concept of Morality and Ethics

The essence of the morality lies in the respect of an individual for the moral principles. Ethics is the science of moral action. It investigates the human practice from the perspective of the current conditions of ethicalness. Accordingly, the ethics, with its mode of critical questioning, provides contribution to the life in terms of the elucidation of the view of morality. "Good will" is the fundamental principle on which the ethics has to be based. Good will means that a person, besides being ready to accept the claims in principle, turns a phenomenon stated to be good into a true rule for their own actions (Pieper, 1999, Translated by: Atayman and Sezer, p. 18-19-22).

The ethics codes a situation, the rules, and the values with the concepts of good or bad and right or wrong. While some unethical conducts are today possible to be brought under the control by way of regulations, some other unethical conducts appear in connection with the unwritten community rules (Kolçak, 2016, p. 3). The advertising campaigns that target the subconscious in a way sometimes possible and sometimes not possible for the people to realize may result from the uses of unethical illustrations on the packagings. Thus, it is observed that the consumers could sometimes tend towards certain products even though they do not actually have an intention to buy these (Ceylan & Ceylan, 2015, p. 139-140).

2. Advertising Ethics

The advertising is a method of marketing communication. The advertising is defined as follows, according to Kotler, 2011;

"The advertising is the most powerful tool to create awareness about a company, product, service, or idea. If a cost calculation is made for every thousand persons to be accessed, no other tool can surpass the advertising. An advertisement, especially if prepared with a creative characteristic, could provide a basis for an image, even a basis for a certain degree of motive for preference, or at least a basis for the acceptability of a brand" (Kotler, 2011, p. 150).

The transfer of information about the products to the consumers occurs with the help of the advertisements. Accordingly, the topics addressed in the advertisements should not carry different meanings and should not be open to abuse. The attention paid in this regard is of great importance from the perspectives of consumer rights, unfair competition, and advertising ethics (Karabaş, 2013, p. 145).

The unlimited domain of the advertising has made ethical rules unavoidable. The reason is that the freedom without rules is a disapproved form of freedom. It would be incorrect to associate the freedom with a case where an individual's rules step in and where the body of rules set for the society to obey is opposed. At this stage, the advertising designs that follow a no-holds-barred approach to attract the target audience to a product are considered out of purpose and unethical.

According to Aktuğlu, 2006, the ethical problem in the advertising is examined under two general categories;

ETHICAL DILEMMA

ETHICAL LAPSE

- a) **Ethical Dilemma:** Some products, despite being legally authorized for sale, are criticized for their advertisements. Whether or not to permit these advertisements is an ethical dilemma. The cigarette advertisements may be given as an example. That a company faces no problem in advertising this product is such as to provide support to the company in enabling the product to cause damage in the consumer (see, Photo No.:1) (Aktuğlu, 2006, p. 9).
- b) **Ethical Lapse:** It is the conveyance of the information in a message deliberately in a false manner to the consumer. Placing on the market and advertising a product as one with calcium addition where said product actually has no ingredient of calcium is an example (see, Photo No.:2) (Aktuğlu, 2006, p. 9).



Photo No. 1: Cigarette Advertising (tobacco.stanford.edu)



Photo No. 2: Packaging Example (thewonderlist.net)

In our country, an Advertising Legislation, which covers the Advertising Code of Practice, is in place in order to resolve the ethical problems in the field of advertising (<http://www.rok.org.tr>). However, there is not any satisfactory penal sanction for the advertisements containing implicit messages. To conduct more serious studies about whether or not the products attracting the attention of the child consumers are healthy is becoming a primary need. In addition, the product packagings for many brands available on the market usually do not reflect the true state of the product.

Results and Interpretation

The degree of awareness of the designers and the design students about the matter of ethical violations, which are committed for the sake of increasing the sales rate of a brand and making immediate gains, is of importance. In the section of the study that follows, the product packagings for the children placed on the market with the help of deceptive images will be examined, the ethical violations present in the illustrations will be identified, and the recommendations will be provided for the parents and the design students in light of the results obtained.

Examination 1: Jean Pierre Chocolate Chip Cookie



Photo No. 3: Packaging Example (www.candelaestereo.com)

When the illustrations on the packaging of the chocolate chip cookie given in Photo No.:3 are examined, it can be readily seen that the target audience of the product is the children. The chocolate chips in the hand of the cartoon character jumping in the air pass through a basketball hoop and scatter over the cookie. The basketball hoop used in the illustration promises energy to the children in case the product is consumed. Since the cookie alone will not look healthy enough when the illustration of the same is viewed, the image of a glass filled with milk is disposed immediately behind the cookie. The packaging provides the product inside it with the image of having plenty of energy, having plenty of chocolate, tasting very good, and being very healthy. Apart from all these, it can be clearly seen when the product is removed from the packaging that the illustrations whetting the appetite of the child consumer and triggering the sense of fun have nothing to do with the product. Whereas the consumer imagines the product as one with plenty of chocolate, only a few chips of chocolate are noticed inside the cookie.

Examination 2: Packagings for the Chewing Gums “CamelBalls” and “Bull’sBalls”



Photo No. 4:

Packaging Example (funnyjunk.com)



Photo No. 5:

Packaging Example (www.confectioneryworld.com.au)

Examination of the chewing gum packagings given in Photos No.: 4 and 5 reveals that a product name or slogan, which is out of purpose and is unethical, is used. The vivid colors, the bright sky, and the very green grass in the background will attract the attention of the children and cause them to tend towards the product. The use of the phrase gluten-free and of the background predominantly in green color in both products conveys to the subconscious the message that the product is healthy. Besides all these, a relationship is established between the form of the product and the animal image present on the packaging, and, due to the association on the mind of the consumers at a young age, the children are caused to turn towards the descriptions that are not proper at all for their development. When the other products under these brands were examined, the packagings for the candies were found to be also available and it was found that it was attempted to make these deliberately used illustrations a reason for preference. However, the packaging for the products such as chewing gum and chocolate frequently preferred by the children should be considered among the packaging groups that require sensitivity and maximum observance of ethical rules.

Examination 3: Packaging for the Chewing Gums “MaoamStripes”



Photo No. 6: *Packaging Example (www.reddit.com)*

Another candy packaging that conveys a negative message to the subconscious of the children is the packaging for the chewing gum Maoam given in Photo No.:6. In this packaging where the vivid colors are preferred, the cute-looking illustrations of the fruits, which are present as the product ingredients, are provided. However, that these cute fruits are used in the positions sending sex signals to the subconscious instead of being shown hugging each other is considered an ethical violation. The sensitivity of the human

brain for three archetypes (*birth, death, sex*) led the advertisers to use these archetypes in the messages intended to be conveyed to the subconscious. This case with the three archetypes will be coded in the brain along with the brand of the product, thereby leading the consumer to purchase the product and ensuring that the brand will never be forgotten. Including the subliminal messages especially in the packagings for the children, besides being wrong, is also incompatible with the ethical rules.

Examination 4: Packaging for the Candy “Skittles”



Photo No. 7: Packaging Example (shop.fallswholesale.co)

Another unethical packaging design is shown in Photo No.:7. The subliminal messages frequently mentioned in various media clearly reveal themselves also on this packaging. These messages, which are given implicatively and which are able to be perceived only by the subconscious, cause the packaging to easily pass the ethical inspection. Thus, the packagings, which attract the attention of the consumers to enable them to purchase the product despite said consumers not being in need of purchasing the same, are deemed to have done their share of work (Ceylan and Eliri, 2014, p. 411). When examined by an average eye, there seems no reason for the packaging to fail in the inspection. The packaging includes the colored candies of the brand Skittles and the letter “S”, the first letter of the brand, is present on the candies. Immediately below, the phrase “Explosion” is included. However, looking at the packaging from a different perspective clearly reveals that an ethical violation is committed. The piece of candy bearing the letter “S” and being especially selected to be in red color is deliberately joined with the phrase Explosion, in which the letter “X” is used in upper case, and the phrase “SEX” is thus formed. This practice was noted again on a candy packaging, which was again intended for the children, and it was observed that the companies and the advertisers seeking to make profit from the product violated the ethical rules.

Examination 5: Balloon Packaging



Photo No. 8: Packaging Example (www.imgur.co)

Photo No.: 8 shows a balloon packaging that bears an alien image. Looking at the illustration of this packaging, for which the target audience is the children, the message “if you buy the product, it will turn

into an alien with a huge head and with huge eyes when inflated" is given to the child consumers. However, it can be seen that the product when actually inflated has nothing to do with the illustration on the packaging. The product is no different than an ordinary balloon with a printed pair of small eyes. The case here involves convincing the consumers with the help of deceptive images and even causing the consumers to be misinformed about the product. If the requirements of the ethical rules are recalled, it will be realized that it is not right to use the deceptive images and to provide the false information about a product. Such packagings were prepared only in an attempt to lead the child consumers to instantly buy the product and to derive an unfair profit from the market.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The concepts of ethics and morality, the ethical rules, and the ethical violations, about which the raised awareness of the designers and the design students are considered beneficial, were mentioned in the study. Moreover, the products, which are produced for the children and are currently available in the market, and the packagings for these products were examined. It was found out as a result of these examinations that;

- The ethical rules are not observed in the packagings intended for the children,
- The products have nothing to do with the illustrations that whet the appetite and trigger the sense of fun in the child consumers,
- A relationship is established between the form of a product and the sexual organ in the animal image present on the packaging, and, due to the association on the mind of the consumers at a young age, the children are caused to turn towards the descriptions that are not proper at all for their development,
- In the illustrations of the fruits present in a product's ingredients, the fruits are used in the positions sending sex signals to the subconscious, instead of said fruits being shown hugging each other,
- Some of the packagings have nothing to do with the product inside them and fail to satisfy the expectations raised on the mind of the children,
- The concept of "SEX" is engraved in the subconscious of the child consumers due to various letter plays, and thus, the companies and the advertisers seeking to derive profit from the product violate the ethical rules in various ways.

These results, while proving the importance of the ethical sensitivity in all the advertising designs and especially in the packaging designs that meet the child consumers, also reveal the necessity for the stakeholders to have knowledge about the subject. In that case, the following are recommended:

- For the packaging designs for which the target audience is the children, the students who receive education on the packaging design should avoid the subliminal messages, the sex, and the deceptive illustrations misguiding the consumers,
- The parents should have awareness about such packagings and should keep their children away from such messages to the maximum extent possible, and
- The authorities should act more sensitively about the inspection of the packaging designs with unethical illustrations in the market.

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ÇOCUKLARA YÖNELİK TASARLANAN ÜRÜN AMBALAJLARINDA BİLİNÇALTI MESAJ ve ETİK DIŞI İLLÜSTRASYONLAR

İbrahim Gökhan CEYLAN

ÖZET

Tüketici ve ürün arasında köprü vazifesi gören kitle iletişim mecralarında, farklı türlerde hazırlanan reklamlar; kişileri, kendi iradesi dâhilinde değil, reklam sahibinin empoze ettiği bilinçle tüketici olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Bu konumlandırma için en etkili yöntem olarak algıları açık olan çocuk tüketicilerin duygularına hitap edecek çeşitli illüstrasyonlardır. Bazen ürün reyonlarında sadece satışı hedefleyen ve içindeki ürünü doğrudan temsil etmeyen illüstrasyonlarla desteklenmiş ambalajlarla karşılaşabilmekteyiz. Bu amaçla konu öncelikli olarak teorik açıdan irdelenmiş, ardından ambalaj tasarımlarındaki bilinçaltı mesajlar ve etik olmayan illüstrasyon kullanımları incelenmiştir. Çalışmanın sonunda, yerli ve yabancı birçok markanın ambalajında yer alan illüstrasyonlar incelendiğinde; ambalaj içeriği ile alakası olmadığı ve ürünü yansıtmadığı, yalnızca tüketicinin ürünü satın alması için ikna etme kaygısı taşıdığı ve çocuk tüketicilerin olumsuz etkilenmelerini sağlayacak örtülü mesajlara yer verildiği görülmüştür. Bu araştırma, tasarım öğrencilerinin çalışmalarında, yanıltıcı ve olumsuz iletilerden uzak durmaları ve etik ihlalleri konusuna hassas yaklaşımları, ebeveyn tüketicilerin ise çocuklarının maruz kaldığı etik dışı iletiler hakkında farkındalık düzeylerinin artırılması açısından önemlidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ambalaj, Etik, İllüstrasyon, Reklam, Bilinçaltı Mesaj