

Ethics and Gender Marketing

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Received: 01/04/2025 Accepted: 02/12/2025 Published: 30/04/2026

Abstract:

Marketing continues to evolve in harmony with a constantly changing environment. New marketing approaches have emerged in the business world, reflecting the strategies adopted by companies. Gender marketing is one such strategy, designed to target both male and female consumers through differentiated products, while enabling companies to increase their revenues through mass sales. However, the principle that “the ends justify the means” raises ethical concerns, as the methods used in gender marketing are not always morally justifiable. Ethical marketing therefore seeks to regulate questionable practices, particularly those related to gender marketing, by encouraging companies to respect ethical standards in order to achieve their objectives responsibly and create value for both the firm and the consumer.

This literature review aims to define gender marketing and ethical marketing and to present examples of unethical practices in gender-based marketing.

Keywords: Gender marketing, Ethics, Ethical marketing, Gender-based marketing.

Résumé :

Le marketing ne cesse de nous étonner par son harmonie avec l’environnement qui est en continuelle évolution ! Des appellations nouvelles au marketing ont surgit dans le monde du commerce représentant la stratégie adoptée par l’entreprise ; Le marketing du genre est la stratégie qui a pu servir les deux genres de consommateurs : les femmes et les hommes, en matière de produits, ainsi que les entreprises en augmentant leurs revenus par la vente en masse. « Les fins justifient les moyens » ; Il semble que ces moyens pour ce genre de marketing ne sont pas totalement justifiables du point de vue éthique et moral. Le marketing éthique vient alors réprimander les stratégies malveillantes, surtout celle du marketing du genre adaptées par les entreprises, et cela en les aidant à respecter les règles de l’éthique pour mieux atteindre leurs objectives et à être un modèle qui ajoute des valeurs pour les deux parties, que ce soit pour l’entreprise ou le consommateur. Dans cette revue littéraire, nous allons expliquer ce que c’est le marketing du genre et le marketing éthique, et donner des exemples des pratiques non-éthique du marketing.

Mots clés : Marketing genré, éthique, marketing éthique, marketing basé sur le genre.

Introduction:

The marketing environment has experienced significant development in all fields, particularly in commercial and economic activities. Marketing, considered the core of business operations, is characterized by intense competition, which has sometimes led to the neglect of recognized ethical rules and principles. One of the main challenges facing modern marketing thought is the extent to which marketers adhere to ethical standards and determine what constitutes ethically acceptable behavior.

The objective of this research is to demonstrate the importance of ethics in marketing, especially when companies adopt gender marketing strategies. Therefore, the main research question is:

What does ethics bring to gender marketing?

To answer this question, the following sub-questions are addressed:

- What are the foundations of ethics in marketing?
- What does gender marketing mean?

- What gender marketing practices are considered unethical?

To address these questions, this study relies on a descriptive theoretical approach based on the collection of information in order to provide an integrated understanding of the phenomenon under study. The paper is divided into two parts: The first part focuses on ethical marketing, while the second examines gender marketing from an ethical perspective.

Part I: Ethical Marketing.

1. Ethics, Morality, and Deontology:

The term « ethics » has been used since the 13th century and derives from the Greek word « ethos », referring to customs and character. Similarly, the term « morality » originates from the Latin word « mores », also meaning customs (Calvez, 2010). In the French language, ethics and morality are often used interchangeably, and in American literature both correspond to the same term, « ethics » (Mercier, 1999). However, in some contexts, the two concepts are distinguished. Morality is considered imperative and absolute, defining good and evil according to established norms, whereas ethics is relative and hypothetical, based on freedom of judgment and action resulting from experience (Boumesbah et al., 2017). In the Arab context, the term ethics (akhlaq) differs from morality (adab). Ethics is often derived from the Quran and the Sunnah and is considered stable and universal, applying to all human behavior. In most cases, it refers to socially and religiously acceptable conduct.

Morality relies on social rules imposed on individuals and helps distinguish right from wrong, whereas ethics answers the question: « What should I do? » It is based on personal judgment and experience and is therefore relative. Today, the concept of morality is often replaced by ethics, as morality is sometimes perceived as rigid and oppressive (De Bry et al., 2008).

The term « deontology » was introduced by Jeremy Bentham in 1834 in his work « Deontology or the Science of Morality ». It refers to professional ethics, meaning the set of rules governing the conduct of individuals within a profession, such as medical, legal, or educational ethics. These rules are often formalized in codes of conduct established and monitored by professional organizations (Isaac & Mercier, 2000).

2. From Individual Ethics to Social Responsibility in Marketing:

Although ethics is an ancient concept, its renewed importance in the economic world is linked to the evolution of modern society. According to Canto-Sperber (2001), the term has become almost unavoidable in the last fifty years, and everyone is expected to know what ethics means. Ethics can be defined as a set of principles, values, and beliefs that guide individual behavior (Mercier, 1999). It varies from one individual to another and serves as a guide for decision-making. Desaulniers (2007) states that ethics does not impose solutions but rather helps individuals understand, reflect, choose, and act responsibly. Within organizations, ethics is closely linked to individual behavior. Corporate values cannot remain fixed because they evolve with the environment and with consumers' expectations. Ethics is no longer limited to internal culture but extends to social responsibility.

The concept of « Corporate Social Responsibility » (CSR) was defined by Bowen (1953) as the obligation of business leaders to pursue policies and decisions desirable in terms of societal values. While ethics and CSR are closely related, marketing ethics is often considered more internal and customer-oriented, whereas CSR marketing is more external and organization-oriented (Laczniak & Murphy, 2019). Kotler, Dubois, and Manceau (2004) consider marketing ethics as part of social responsibility and refer to it as « societal marketing », which includes principles and standards determining acceptable marketing practices.

3. Ethical Marketing:

Ethical marketing refers to practices that emphasize transparency, responsibility, fairness, and integrity toward consumers and stakeholders (Murphy et al., 2005). Kotler et al. (2004) define ethical marketing as the process of satisfying customer needs more effectively than competitors while preserving or improving the well-being of consumers and society.

The growing importance of ethical marketing can be explained by several factors:

- Globalization has expanded business activities beyond borders, increasing the need for ethical standards.
- Unethical practices can damage a company's reputation and destroy consumer trust.
- Consumers increasingly prefer products from ethically responsible companies.
- Ethical marketing helps manage corporate interests in accordance with social responsibility.
- It promotes fair competition and improves market exchanges.
- It encourages teamwork and productivity within organizations.
- It contributes to economic and social development at the community level.

4. Ethical Standards and Values for Marketers:

In the recent past, companies and consumers have faced numerous challenges that have made ethical action necessary. Food crises are among the most significant examples. The « mad cow disease crisis » (1996–2000) profoundly affected consumer habits regarding beef consumption (Cazes-Valette, 2001). The « avian influenza crisis (H5N1) » disrupted the global poultry market and threatened human life. The introduction of «genetically modified organisms » (GMOs) in agriculture has also generated continuous controversy among consumers (Kreziak & Joly, 2001). More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–2022) paralyzed global trade and caused millions of deaths, while accelerating the growth of electronic commerce, which is not free from unethical practices. However, ethics is not limited to preventing crises but also involves correcting any form of misconduct. The American Marketing Association (AMA) established a statement of ethics that forms part of a code of conduct defining expected behavior for anyone interacting within the marketing community. This statement includes the highest standards of professional conduct and ethical values for companies and professional organizations.

Marketers are expected to adopt the highest ethical standards and values in their responsibilities toward multiple stakeholders, including customers, employees, investors, regulators, and society. The AMA ethical statement (revised 2021) highlights the following principles:

- **Ethical norms:**

Ethical norms are principles informed by society and adopted by the AMA to guide the behavior of stakeholders.

- ✓ **Marketers must:**

- **Do no harm:** avoid harmful actions and strive to benefit all stakeholders and society while respecting laws and regulations.
- **Foster integrity:** promote transparency and fairness in all aspects of marketing activities.
- **Adopt ethical values:** build trust with stakeholders through honesty, responsibility, fairness, transparency, and citizenship.

- **Ethical values:**

Values represent the collective understanding of what is considered appropriate and morally acceptable.

- ✓ **Honesty:**

- Be honest in all situations and with all stakeholders.
- Avoid manipulation, coercion, or misleading communication.
- Keep promises and commitments.

✓ **Responsibility:**

- Recognize social obligations linked to economic power.
- Consider environmental and societal impact in decision-making.
- Protect private and sensitive information.
- Accept the consequences of marketing decisions.

✓ **Fairness:**

- Promote diversity and inclusive marketing practices.
- Respect vulnerable consumers.
- Avoid stereotypes or dehumanizing representations.
- Treat all partners with respect regardless of culture.

✓ **Transparency:**

- Communicate clearly with all stakeholders.
- Accept feedback.
- Explain potential risks.
- Disclose relevant information.
- Avoid conflicts of interest.

✓ **Citizenship:**

- Fulfill economic, legal, and social responsibilities.
- Protect the environment.
- Support community initiatives.
- Improve the reputation of marketing.
- Ensure fairness throughout the marketing ecosystem.

Although the AMA ethical code is not legally binding, it helps marketers become more aware of ethical issues and can be considered an illustration of “*virtue ethics in marketing*” (Laczniak & Murphy, 2010).

5. Unethical Practices in Marketing:

The most common ethical problems in marketing activities include the following:

- **Deceptive advertising:**

Advertising often uses misleading information to persuade consumers. Deception may involve false claims, incomplete information, or messages that create incorrect impressions in order to encourage purchases.

- **Exaggerated praise:**

Advertisers frequently use exaggerated or superlative expressions such as « the best », « the ultimate », or « number one », without objective evidence. Although such claims may not always violate the law, they raise ethical concerns because they can mislead consumers and discredit competitors.

- **Subliminal advertising:**

Subliminal advertising attempts to influence hidden desires, create artificial needs, and stimulate unnecessary consumption. This practice can encourage emotional buying and over-consumption, sometimes leading to environmentally harmful behavior.

- **Sexual content in advertising:**

Many companies use sexual imagery to attract attention, even when it is unrelated to the product. Such practices may offend social norms and raise ethical concerns, as marketing should respect culturally accepted values.

- **Advertising harmful products:**

Promoting products that may damage health, such as alcohol or tobacco, raises ethical questions because these products can harm individuals and society while increasing corporate profits.

- **Advertising targeting children:**

Children are particularly vulnerable to advertising due to their innocence and lack of critical thinking. Marketing strategies that pressure children to influence their families' purchases are considered unethical.

- **Sexist representations:**

Some advertisements reinforce stereotypes by portraying women only as housewives, caregivers, or objects of desire, while men may also be objectified. Such representations limit social roles and may negatively influence consumer perceptions.

- **Gendered products:**

Many products are differentiated only by color, packaging, or marketing message, without real functional differences. Examples include gender-specific pens, razors, or toothpaste. These practices may create artificial distinctions between consumers.

- **Gender-based pricing:**

Gendered products often have different prices despite identical composition or function. In many cases, products marketed to women are more expensive than those marketed to men, especially in cosmetics. This phenomenon raises ethical concerns because it may constitute discrimination.

Part II: Gender Marketing and Ethics:

1. Gender, Sex, and Gender Stereotypes:

Before discussing gender marketing, it is important to define certain related concepts.

The term « gender » refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men (Council of Europe Convention, 2011). As a sociodemographic variable, gender is one of the first criteria used in market segmentation. It reflects socially and culturally constructed relationships between men and women, shaped through socialization, which influence behaviors and attitudes.

In contrast, « sex » refers to the biological distinction between males and females. When discussing men and women, we often refer to « gender stereotypes », which are extremely powerful. From birth, individuals learn through family, school, and media signals that associate certain traits, skills, and roles with one sex rather than the other. These stereotypes shape our perception of the roles of men and women in society.

Gender stereotypes influence consumer choices by directing preferences, purchasing behavior, and perceptions of products or services. They shape expectations according to social norms associated with each gender, which may lead consumers to select products based on predefined roles (Tissier-Desbordes & Kimmel, 2002).

Consumers differ in their sociodemographic characteristics, and marketers must consider these differences, as well as the evolution of gender roles in society, when developing marketing strategies.

2. What is Gender Marketing?

Modern marketing is strongly consumer-oriented (Armstrong & Kotler, 2016). The concept of « gender marketing » began to develop in the 1970s and became more visible in the 1980s, particularly in advertising targeting women. A well-known example is the brand Moulinex, which addressed women as housewives, reflecting the social role of women at that time. Gender marketing is characterized by the segmentation of consumers into male and female categories through stereotyped messages, with the objective of promoting products or services to a specific target group. In practice, gender marketing consists of differentiating products according to the consumer's gender, relying on culturally defined gender references. As product supply increased due to industrial development, companies personalized their offers to remain competitive. Gender marketing strategies often involve:

- gender-based segmentation,
- gender-targeted advertising,
- gender-specific product design and packaging.

Gender-targeted advertising uses language, images, and themes intended to appeal to a specific gender group. Product design may also differ through colors, shapes, and materials traditionally associated with men or women. In many cases, gender marketing relies on stereotypes already present in society, especially in communication strategies.

3. Importance of Social Roles and Stereotypes in Marketing:

Since the 1960s, women have increasingly entered the labor market and gained financial independence, making them an important consumer segment. Women are estimated to influence a large proportion of household purchasing decisions. In traditional marketing, companies often targeted women in product categories such as cleaning products, cosmetics, health products, fashion, and household appliances. However, consumption patterns have changed. For example, while large cars were traditionally associated with men, a significant percentage of buyers of certain models are women (Souhila Dali-Youcef, 2012).

At the same time, men's roles have also evolved. Men increasingly participate in household tasks and childcare, and their consumption habits have changed. Many men now use cosmetic products, hair treatments, and fashion items that were previously associated with women. Because of these changes, marketers consider social roles and stereotypes when designing gender marketing strategies. Gendered products may be marketed in three main ways:

1. A gender-neutral product marketed to both men and women.
2. A product designed specifically for one gender.
3. A product originally designed for one gender but later marketed to the other.

Regardless of the strategy, there is always a risk of failure, especially if the product does not meet consumer expectations. For example, Coca-Cola introduced several gender-oriented variations such as Coca-Cola Light and Coca-Cola Zero, which were associated with different consumer groups. These strategies illustrate how companies sometimes adapt their products to specific segments in order to strengthen brand positioning. Gendered products often rely on « color symbolism », such as pink or purple for women and blue or black for men. According to the CCI Color Institute, individuals form an unconscious judgment about an object within 90 seconds of visual contact, and a large part of this judgment is based on color. Design, slogans, packaging, and merchandising techniques also play an important role in communicating gender identity and guiding consumers toward specific products.

4. Gendered Advertising;

Advertising plays a central role in gender marketing. It does not only promote products, but also transmits social norms and cultural representations related to masculinity and femininity. Many advertisements rely on stereotypes to make messages easier to understand and more persuasive. Women are frequently portrayed in domestic roles, as caregivers, mothers, or objects of beauty, while men are often represented as strong, active,

and successful. These representations may influence consumer perceptions and reinforce traditional gender roles. In some cases, the use of stereotypes can make communication more effective because it relies on familiar social codes. However, excessive reliance on stereotypes may create ethical problems, especially when it leads to discrimination or negative representations.

Advertising that objectifies the human body, particularly the female body, has been widely criticized. The use of sexual imagery to attract attention, even when unrelated to the product, raises ethical concerns because it may reduce individuals to objects and promote unrealistic standards of beauty. In recent years, many consumers have become more sensitive to these issues, and some companies have started to adopt more inclusive advertising strategies that avoid stereotypes and promote diversity.

5. Gender-Based Pricing (Pink Tax):

One of the most controversial aspects of gender marketing is « gender-based pricing », sometimes called the « pink tax ». This phenomenon occurs when similar products are sold at different prices depending on whether they are marketed to men or women. Studies have shown that products targeted at women are often more expensive than equivalent products targeted at men, even when the composition and function are identical. This difference is frequently observed in cosmetics, personal care products, clothing, and accessories. Companies justify these price differences by referring to higher production costs, different packaging, or marketing expenses. However, critics argue that these explanations are not always valid and that gender-based pricing may constitute a form of discrimination. From an ethical perspective, gender pricing raises questions about fairness and equality. Consumers may perceive such practices as unjust, which can damage the brand image and reduce trust in the company.

6. Ethics and Neuromarketing:

The development of new technologies has introduced new ethical challenges in marketing. One of these challenges is « neuromarketing », which uses neuroscience techniques to study consumer reactions to marketing stimuli. Neuromarketing can measure brain activity, emotional responses, and attention levels in order to design more effective advertisements and products. While these techniques can improve customer satisfaction by better understanding consumer needs, they also raise ethical concerns. Critics argue that neuromarketing may be used to manipulate consumers by influencing unconscious processes. If companies use scientific knowledge to encourage excessive consumption or to exploit vulnerable individuals, this may be considered unethical. Therefore, the use of neuromarketing should respect ethical principles such as transparency, responsibility, and respect for consumer autonomy.

7. Conclusion:

Marketing ethics has become an essential issue in modern business. Companies must balance profitability with social responsibility and respect for consumers. Gender marketing illustrates this challenge clearly. On one hand, gender segmentation can help companies better understand consumer needs and offer more personalized products. On the other hand, excessive reliance on stereotypes, discriminatory pricing, or manipulative communication may create ethical problems. Consumers today are more informed and more sensitive to issues related to equality, diversity, and social responsibility. As a result, companies that adopt ethical marketing practices are more likely to build trust and maintain a positive brand image in the long term. The future of marketing may move toward more inclusive and gender-neutral strategies, which respect individual differences without reinforcing stereotypes. Such an approach can contribute to both business success and social progress.

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