Ethical concerns over the use of fear appeals when targeting vulnerable populations

Stephanie Hutchinson

Edith Cowan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons

Part of the Public Relations and Advertising Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is posted at Research Online. https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons/1025
Edith Cowan University

Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study.

The University does not authorize you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following:

- Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.

- A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. Where the reproduction of such material is done without attribution of authorship, with false attribution of authorship or the authorship is treated in a derogatory manner, this may be a breach of the author’s moral rights contained in Part IX of the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth).

- Courts have the power to impose a wide range of civil and criminal sanctions for infringement of copyright, infringement of moral rights and other offences under the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth). Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.
Ethical Concerns over the use of Fear Appeals when Targeting Vulnerable Populations.

Stephanie Hutchinson
Bachelor of Business Honours Degree
Faculty of Business and Law
5th November 2010
USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
Abstract

Advertising is a promotional tool that marketers use to build awareness of an organisation's product or service, and the success of their communication efforts lie in being able to effectively and efficiently reach their target audience, therefore different appeals are used to persuade different audiences.

This study was conducted to determine if there was a positive relationship between the use of fear appeals targeted to vulnerable people, and the advertisement being perceived as unethical, therefore providing a better understanding of the effects of advertising tactics that involve a disadvantaged target audience who may be prone to manipulation, and the detrimental effects they have on the recipient.

To test the theory that the population perceive this as an unethical practice a sample population were given two different scenarios then shown the same advertisement using a fear appeal message targeted at seniors, the respondents then answered two identical sets of questions designed to measure the perceived ethicality of each ad.

Findings revealed that advertisements with even a mild fear appeal are considered unethical when the audience are of a vulnerable nature, and that a relationship exists between the perceived ethicality of an ad and the level of discomfort the audience feels when viewing it.

Marketers are always looking for the most effective ways to market their products and this study has provided empirical evidence that there is a negative reaction to the type of marketing message and choice of target market, when the audience are considered to be vulnerable. Therefore organisations that use this form of advertising may want to adjust their marketing campaigns accordingly.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

i. incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

ii. contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

iii. contain any defamatory material.

I grant permission for the Library at Edith Cowan University to make duplicate copies of my thesis as required.
Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to the following people for all their help and support whilst writing this thesis, I couldn’t have done it without them:

My supervisor, Dr Kate Mizerski

Thank you for your encouragement, extensive knowledge, and advice.

My family; Mum, Dad, Tom, Sophie & Ben

Thank you so much for always believing in me, encouraging me and loving me.
Table of Contents

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................... III
DECLARATION ......................................................................................................................................... IV
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................................... IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS .............................................................................................................................. V
LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................................................ VI
LIST OF FIGURES AND APPENDICES ................................................................................................. VIII
CHAPTER 1 ................................................................................................................................................ 1
1.0 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................................. 1
1.1 BACKGROUND .................................................................................................................................... 2
1.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY .................................................................................................................. 3
1.2.1 Research question ......................................................................................................................... 3
1.3 EXPECTED OUTCOMES ..................................................................................................................... 4
1.4 SIGNIFICANCE .................................................................................................................................... 4
CHAPTER 2 ................................................................................................................................................ 5
2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW .......................................................................................................................... 5
2.1 INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................................... 5
2.2 MARKETING ETHICS .......................................................................................................................... 6
2.3 FEAR APPEALS ................................................................................................................................... 11
2.4 VULNERABLE GROUPS ...................................................................................................................... 16
2.5 THE ELDERLY AS A VULNERABLE GROUP ....................................................................................... 17
2.6 SUMMARY .......................................................................................................................................... 18
CHAPTER 3 ................................................................................................................................................ 19
3. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK ..................................................................................................................... 19
3.1 RESEARCH FOCUS ............................................................................................................................ 19
3.2 HYPOTHESIS ....................................................................................................................................... 20
CHAPTER 4 ................................................................................................................................................ 21
4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................................. 21
4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN ............................................................................................................................ 21
4.2 POPULATION AND SAMPLE ............................................................................................................. 22
4.3 RESEARCH INSTRUMENT ................................................................................................................... 22
4.4 DATA COLLECTION ............................................................................................................................ 24
4.5 DATA ANALYSIS ............................................................................................................................... 24
4.6.3 Ethical considerations .................................................................................................................... 25
CHAPTER 5 ................................................................................................................................................ 26
5. RESULTS ................................................................................................................................................. 26
5.1 DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE ............................................................................................................... 26
5.1.1 Demographic characteristics ......................................................................................................... 26
5.2 RESEARCH FINDINGS ......................................................................................................................... 30
5.2.1 Ethicality comparisons between conditions .................................................................................. 30
5.2.2 Summary of t-test ......................................................................................................................... 30
5.2.3 ANOVA to test for comparisons between demographics and ethicality ...................................... 30
5.2.3 ANOVA to test for comparisons between ethicality and items q2 & q3 2, 3, 8 and 11................. 31
List of Tables

Table 1. Scale for Questionnaire
Table 2. Conditions of Survey
Table 3. Demographic characteristics of sample
Table 4. Ethicality compared to responses for items q2,2, q2,3, q2,8, q2,11 (condition 1)
Table 5. Ethicality compared to responses for items q3,2, q3,3, q3,8, q3,11 (condition 2)

List of Figures and Appendices

Figure 1. Research framework
Figure 2. Age distribution by percentage
Figure 3. Gender distribution by percentage
Figure 4. Marital status distribution by percentage
Figure 5. Parental status distribution by percentage
Appendix 1: Information letter to participants
Appendix 2: Questionnaire.
CHAPTER 1

1.0 Introduction

Advertising and promotion form an integral part of an organisations' marketing program with the strategies designed to effectively reach as many of their targeted market as possible. Messages aimed at these markets can be informative, and/or persuasive, in order to encourage consumers to purchase the organisations products.

This study examines the relationship between the marketers' use of fear as an appeal when targeting the elderly; a group often considered vulnerable, and whether the choice of an anxiety provoking message appeal is deemed to be an ethical marketing practice.

According to Belch and Belch (2007) one of the most important creative strategy decisions for an advertiser is the choice of appeal to be used and whether it should be focused on the rational aspect of the consumer’s decision making process, or the emotional; as in the use of humour or fear appeals. Another central decision is the choice of target market demographic most appropriate for the advertising message, when this includes groups of people who are considered vulnerable as the preferred choice of target group, concerns are raised as to their ethicality.
1.1 Background

The main problem that was addressed in this study was the relationship between vulnerability and fear arousing message appeals, and under what circumstances the general population perceive them to be unethical (Brenkert, 1998).

While there are a number of studies providing empirical evidence of a positive relationship between the level of fear in an appeal and the level of anxiety it causes (c.f., Spence, 1972), there is very little evidence as to how an anxiety provoking form of advertising affects a vulnerable target market, and specifically the elderly. Furthermore, the majority of contributions to marketing ethics have demonstrated that there is a great deal of confusion as to what is deemed ethical practice, as different moral philosophies (teleological or deontological) base their perception of ethicality on different values.

There are currently a number of organisations that have advertisements in print and on air that use fear appeals to sell their products. For example, insurance companies sell funeral savings plans, tyre companies sell safer tyres, and numerous companies promote personal hygiene products using fear appeals. While very different products, the common thread is the targeting of what could be perceived as a vulnerable group (i.e., the elderly, parents and youth). The focus of the current study was on the marketing of funeral plans to the elderly.

From a promotional perspective, funeral services and plans come under the heading of service marketing (Lovelock, Patterson, & Walker, 2007). Funeral companies offer a service that is essentially intangible and although the consumer may become the owner of a burial plot or cremation plaque, the service the company provides is what the customer is actually paying for. Funerals are a very sensitive subject for most people so marketers have to not only sell something that most people don’t want to think about, but also have to take into account the sensitivity of the subject. Death, however, is inevitable for everyone at some time, and someone has to bear the costs of the funeral, usually the closest family member. So funeral and insurance companies offer a funeral plan service where consumers can invest their money over a number of years so that
when they die the costs of their funeral are covered. The problem here is that to encourage consumers to plan ahead, they need to be shown what will happen if they don’t, which is where the fear appeal comes in.

Some funeral companies base their advertising strategy around the fact that the person left paying the bill is often not in a financial position to do so, and to emphasise this point they use testimonials from people who have had to go through the experience of burying a close relative, and were liable for the funeral costs at a time when they should have been grieving not having to worry about where they would find the money to pay for a funeral service. The question of ethicality when using this form of advertising is when the audience are already vulnerable, such as the elderly, and putting pressure on them to invest money they may not have by manipulative tactics is not considered to be an ethical marketing practice.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to gain an understanding of whether targeting a vulnerable group as opposed to a non-vulnerable group was perceived by the general population to be an ethical marketing practice.

1.2.1 Research question

The research in this field has a focus on marketing ethics as a theory and the effectiveness of high or low fear appeals, without covering the added construct of vulnerability. Therefore this study has attempted to answer the following question:

- Is the use of fear appeals in advertising an ethical practice when the target market is perceived to be vulnerable?
1.3 Expected outcomes

A study into how the population perceive such advertising methods and their ethicality will most likely show that there is a positive relationship between the use of fear appeals and their perceived effectiveness, as several other studies have previously indicated (LaTour, Rotfeld, 1997, Hastings, Stead, Webb, 2004, Donovan, Jalleh, Henley, 1999). However the research should also provide an indication whether the population consider advertisements unethical because of their use of fear appeals, and if the levels of fear are a contributing factor to their ethicality. It is expected that the study will show that the population agree that it is unethical to use fear appeals when the audience is a known vulnerable group, but acceptable when the target audience are not considered vulnerable, even if fear has a positive or negative effect on purchase intention.

1.4 Significance

The significance of this research is that it will provide marketers and consumers a better understanding of how the general population feel about the use of fear appeals in advertising to vulnerable people.

If the research showed an overwhelming majority of the population were opposed to this form of advertising when the target market was perceived as vulnerable, then there is the opportunity for people to lobby against the advertisers who use this form of marketing practice with a view to stopping the ads from running, or forcing them to choose a more ethical form of message appeal.

Government regulators and industry bodies will also be interested, and there is an opportunity for the decision makers of organisations to re-consider their message strategies when their target markets are considered vulnerable, and to put in place ethical guidelines that can be used to assess the most appropriate form of advertising if they are attempting to reach a vulnerable group.
CHAPTER 2

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The focus of this literature review is the ethicality of using a fear appeal based message strategy when marketing to a vulnerable group. To gain an understanding of the problems associated with using fear appeals to reach vulnerable populations, and why they can be considered unethical, relevant literature on the three variables, ethics, fear appeals and vulnerability, was gathered and analysed.

Several key papers were used as representative of the views of the majority of the literature, and their research was analysed by looking at the methodology, old and new theories that came under discussion, and their conclusions. The information was then summarised to give an overview of the credibility of the research already undertaken in the areas of ethics, fear appeals, and vulnerable populations, the limitations of their studies, and where new research would be needed.

The first area of research considered ethical practice in marketing. Several articles providing contradictory views on the parameters of ethical decision making for marketers, and how effective guidelines are within a marketing environment were reviewed. In addition, a summary of models that are used to show how decisions are made was included as they play an important role in the relevant literature.
The review then addresses the literature concerning ‘fear appeals’, including the differing views on their effectiveness, and whether they are used to increase profits without consideration for the effect they can have on the recipients; leading to the question of their ethicality as a communication tool. The final section of the literature review covers the issue of vulnerability, including a societal view of the dimensions of vulnerability and whether it is a temporary or ongoing state.

The aim of the literature review is to build a foundation of information in the form of secondary research that can then be built on to fill any gaps in the area of study for this paper. The significance of such research is that the general public need to be made aware that while marketing is a legitimate business practice, under certain circumstances it may be viewed as taking unfair advantage of a population unable to make informed rational choices.

In some cases groups may be targeted specifically because they are vulnerable, and fear appeals are the most effective form of marketing communication that enables the organisation to make the most profit. All legitimate businesses should be bound by ethics and made accountable for their actions, but discerning what should be considered as crossing the line between what is ethical and what is not is an area of research that is incomplete.

### 2.2 Marketing Ethics

="Strong ethics keep corporations healthy. Poor ethics make companies sick. Values are the immune system of every organisation".

Author, Patrick Dixon 2005

Marketing ethics are described by Lacznia & Murphy (1993) as “How moral standards are applied to marketing decisions, behaviours, and institutions”, or “standards of conduct and moral judgement applied to marketing practice” (Gaski, 1999).
To summarise the plethora of literature available, several articles with differing ideas were selected to represent a general view of the subject. Within the literature there appears to be a general consensus that marketing ethics in the form of guidelines need to be followed to ensure that organisational marketing efforts are not only kept within a legal framework, but are based on sound ethical reasoning (Tsalikis & Fritzsche, 1989). Emphasis was placed on what factors influence an individual’s ability to make ethical decisions, and models were used to give an account of the actual processes an individual goes through when making decisions regarding ethical issues (Tsalikis et al, 1989). There were differing views as to what constitutes ethical decision-making, and if ethics should be taken into consideration at all when making marketing decisions (Gaski, 1999), as according to Gaski (1999) abiding by the law, or acting in the companies own self-interest are sufficient in covering any ethical dilemmas in the marketing environment.

Tsalikis and Fritzsche’s (1989) study confirms that there are many conflicting theories and ideas associated with ethical evaluation, and that although ethical reasoning has long been recognised as based on moral philosophy (Nill, and Schibrowsky, 2007), with either a teleological approach, that actions are judged by their consequences, or the deontological view, that consequences are irrelevant and it is the action itself which is right or wrong, there are other important factors that need to be considered such as egoism, justice and relativism (Tsalikis et al, 1989). Similarly Hunt and Vitell (2006) believe that ethical judgements are reached by using a combination of deontological and teleological evaluations, as well as an individual’s own set of personal moral values, therefore the decision process is based not only on their philosophical ideology, but on their culture, religion and family values. Hunt et al (2006) and Tsalikis et al’s (1989) statements reflect a constant debate on the variables that affect ethical decisions in the marketing literature, making it almost impossible to set guidelines that encompass universal views on normative ethics.

Tsalikis and Fritzsche (1989) offer a literary review of business ethics, with a focus on marketing ethics, providing a comprehensive summary of information gathered on the subject up to 1989. The authors begin by explaining the meaning of ethics in a business environment and go on to describe how various ethical theories are used to make ethical
decisions. Tsalikis, et al. (1989) then discuss the need for codes of conduct as a means of regulating ethics decision making, as managers in a position to make decisions of an ethical nature may not have the moral fortitude to make the right decisions without ethical guidelines set out for them. This view mirrors the statement made by Hunt et al (2006) that an individual's moral values have a direct effect on ethical decision-making.

Tsalikis, et al's (1989) paper cites several surveys from previous studies showing that nearly all large corporations have ethical codes of conduct in place, as do state governments, however according to Brigley (1994) it is shown that 80% of managers are required to use their own moral values to make ethical decisions even when the organisation has a set of ethical guidelines, and that young managers within an organisation were likely to go against their own moral judgment if it showed loyalty towards their superiors, another view is that the pressures that managers are under may influence their decision-making.

A conflicting view was held by Olivette (1995) who posits that manager's feel they have to compromise their personal ethics to achieve corporate goals and that there is no direct relationship between the personal value systems of individuals and ethical decision making in a competitive marketing environment. This view however seems to be held by a limited few whereas numerous papers have found a correlation between an individual's personal moral values and beliefs and the ethical decisions that marketing managers are faced with, and that an individual's philosophical ideology based on personal experience and cultural influences is definitely used as a key resource upon which they draw for ethical decision-making (Badaracco & Webb, 1995). Therefore individuals with different cultures will have different ethical beliefs and different ethical behaviour (Tsalikis, et al, 1989).

While Tsalikis et al's (1989) provide a thorough review of the literature up to 1989, since then new ideas have emerged that put more emphasis on the societal view of business ethics, putting marketing ethics under close scrutiny as society as a whole expects a higher level of ethical behaviour from marketers (Lazniak, 1993).
Gaski (1999) states that there are no marketing ethics as such, but only ethical prescriptions that can be reduced conceptually to either "obey the law" or "act in self-interest". Gaski’s (1999) theory is based on empirical evidence gathered from research using methodology that included listing seventeen ethical prescriptions, then showing examples that could prove they all fall under the umbrella of obeying the law, or acting in self-interest. He also conducted surveys on 500 marketing practitioners using the AMA directory as a frame, with the results showing an overwhelming agreement with his theory. However, Gaski’s (1999) research appeared to be limited by the use of outdated literature, with only one citation after 1993, the study was also restricted to decision making by marketing managers, completely disregarding the ethical guidelines required for market researchers, or other stakeholders affected by ethical issues in marketing.

Smith (2001) contradicts Gaski’s theory by suggesting that marketers need ethical guidelines and that legal and self-interest prescriptions are not sufficient, this view also ties in with Tsalikis et al’s (1989) theory that ethical decisions are based on a number of variables including personal moral judgements and situational factors. Belch & Belch (2007 p.719) also agree that marketing decisions about what is appropriate in certain situations should be made based on ethical considerations not just because it meets the legal or industry guidelines, because ethics should govern actions and decisions as they are moral principles that should be followed in all ethically related situations. This view is also held by Hunt, et al. (2003) who agree that individuals may make unethical choices based on the best outcome for them if there are no guidelines other than obeying the law or acting in self-interest, and that the law represents the lowest denominator of expected behaviour for marketing and business practices (Hunt, et al, 2003).

Smith (2001) discusses numerous situations where the law and economic self-interest conflict, and therefore ethical decisions should be made. He provides examples of historical events where ethical decisions have overridden any legal or self-interest framework proving that the demands of managers are more than just based on adhering to legal rules and acting in self-interest but are grounded by ethical guidelines based on
one’s own personal moral judgement (Smith, 2001). One of the limitations of Smith’s (2001) paper was that out of only three examples one was based more on a philanthropic decision rather than an ethical one, and the outcome of the other two scenarios did in fact result in complying with economical self-interest in the long run.

This contradiction is apparent as example one in Smith’s (2001) paper was based on the development and distribution of an “Orphan Drug” for river blindness funded and distributed by the Merck organisation, the company was not following the law or acting in their own self-interest according to Smith (2001) but were making an ethical decision to develop a drug that was needed by people who were unable to pay for it. However, the example is not one of an ethical nature, as the company were not put in a position where they had to make an ethical decision; instead the organisation decided to show compassion, charity and humanitarianism which are essentially philanthropic decisions not ethical ones.

A large quantity of the literature focused on ways of evaluating ethical dilemmas by using models that increase comprehension of how ethical decisions are made by marketers. Trevino’s (1992) decision making model, shows that ethical decisions are based on an interaction between individual and situational components, Hunt and Vitell’s (2003) ‘General Theory of Ethics Model’, offers process theories that can be used to determine the thought processes used in ethical decision-making, also Hunt Ferrell and Gresham’s (1989) ‘Contingency Framework for Understanding Ethical Decision Making in Marketing Model’ shows how decisions are influenced by many different factors, and finally Ferrell, Gresham, and Fraedrich’s (1989) ‘Synthesis of Ethical Decision Models for Marketing’ synthesises the processes with the influential factors giving a better understanding of how the two variables work together. The benefit of using these models is not only to learn more about how decisions are made, but as a theoretical foundation for empirical investigation (Hunt & Vitell, 2003).

Through the use of models, the processes and determining factors of ethical decision making can be studied to gain a better understanding of how ethical marketing choices are made, for example what ethical factors influence the decision on targeting strategies,
message strategies and product or brand issues? Are they based on the decision makers’ philosophical ideals or the individual’s circumstance at the time, or the company’s economic situation, or pressure from management? All of which are reputed to have an affect on how an ethical decision is made (LaTour & Rotfeld, 1997).

What factors are taken into account when companies decide to use fear appeals to market their products, or when they choose to target vulnerable populations? Do the companies concerned consider the ethical aspects of their marketing campaigns? By gaining an understanding of the thought processes that go into making ethical decisions and using ethical decision making guidelines there is an opportunity for organisations to limit unethical marketing practices in the future.

2.3 Fear Appeals

Fear appeals are used by marketers to elicit an emotional response to a perceived threat that is made apparent through various forms of communication, motivating the recipient towards action to alleviate the threat (Duke, Pickett, & Grove, 1993). The fear appeal works on the assumption that the audience viewing the advertisement will have a reaction to the message that causes a feeling of anxiety, that can only be relieved by either stopping the behaviour outlined in the advertisement, such as smoking, which carries the threat of death or social exclusion, or by purchasing the product advertised, to reduce the chance of a negative outcome. When the target group is considered vulnerable the ethics of such marketing tactics become more of an issue, as vulnerable groups don’t always have the coping mechanism needed to be able to make an informed decision when under pressure (Duke et al, 1993).

There are two types of fear arousal, inhibitory, which evokes a feeling of horror from seeing graphic pictures or hearing gruesome descriptions of an event, or anticipatory, a cognitive response showing what may happen if a recommended course of action is ignored (Donovan & Henley, 2003).
Depending on the type of fear arousal used, different levels of anxiety are expected, and different ethical questions are posed. According to Hastings, Steed and Webb (2004), ethical concerns with inhibitory fear appeals include the use of graphical and upsetting images that can be seen by people other than the intended audience, and that such high levels of fear can have a deleterious effect on people unable to cope with such high levels of anxiety. The use of anticipatory fear appeals also has ethical repercussions as the audience is being persuaded that without buying the advertised product or service there will be an unwanted outcome such as social ostracism or financial hardship, this also arouses feelings of anxiety and dread in the recipient (Hastings, et al, 2004).

According to LaTour and Zahra (1989) fear appeals are designed specifically to create anxiety and tension in the audience in order to offer a solution to the problem, or a way to reduce the fearful feelings by recommending their product. To expand on this premise the process can be reduced to three steps (LaTour & Zahra, 1989). The first is to create a fearful situation so the audience are made aware of the issue and its severity. The second step is to emphasise the relationship between the audiences’ vulnerability to the risk being portrayed in the ad, and the third phase is to offer a solution to the problem such as the purchase of a funeral plan, death insurance or a specific brand of tyres.

However LaTour & Zahra (1989) also suggest that individuals have different cognitive responses to fear appeals which result primarily in either energy leading to positivity, or a feeling of tension leading to negativity. The outcome being that fear appeals can have either a positive or negative effect on different people resulting in either positive or negative associations with the ad and therefore the brand.

According to the chief executive of the Central Office of Information in the UK, Mark Lund, they have stopped using fear as a motivator as it “doesn’t appear to jolt people into action” (Lund, 2000). He also suggested that fear can have a disempowering effect on the recipient, which in turn leads them to lose all sense of urgency, as they think ‘this thing is so terrible that I can’t do anything about it so there is no point in acting’ (Lund,
This situation is obviously not the desired effect that a marketer sets out to achieve, however that doesn’t make it unethical, just not very effective.

Despite the views of some practitioners, according to Arthur and Quester (2004) the use of fear appeal messages appears to actually be on the increase even though studies do seem to show that it is only effective at certain levels and is situation, topic, and person specific (LaTour & Rotfield, 1997). Previous research into threatening messages has mainly been focused on how varying levels of threat or persuasion can have different effects on the recipient, which can be shown in a curvilinear model (Arthur et al, 2004). The model demonstrates that “fear can persuade up to a certain threshold of tolerance, beyond which it becomes counterproductive” (Levanthal, 1970). The model is conducive with the theory that high levels of fear don’t necessarily relate to a positive response in the targeted market (Arthur et al, 2004).

More recent studies reject the curvilinear model by adopting the view that the relationship between levels of threat and persuasion are more linear in shape and are of a positive nature (Arthur et al, 2004). One theory is based on the research undertaken by LaTour, et al. (1997) which posits that the findings of their study indicate that “the most persuasive advertisement generates the greatest energy activation with a target segment”. The study based its research on a meta-analysis of 35 published studies, with a wide range of opinions and theories, the result of the data collection showed overwhelmingly that threats evoke different responses from people in different situations, but the higher the level of threat the more positive the response. Also their research stressed that to understand the effect of fear appeals on an audience new research must study how relevant the topic is to the target market (LaTour, et al, 1997).

Arthur, et al (2004) focused on social acceptance of cigarette smoking, and whether fear appeals were effective in getting across the anti-smoking message. The sample and methodology for the study included showing a class of undergraduate students a newspaper advertisement with a fear appeal message showing how socially unacceptable smoking is. The respondents were then asked to rate the advertisement in a survey, using various measures such as the Likert scale. The sample group was chosen
“because they are a highly relevant population for a study regarding cigarette smoking, given that the majority of smokers take up the habit during their juvenile years” (Arthur, et al, 2004). The results showed empirical evidence that the amount of fear an advertisement generates is directly related to the level of persuasion (Arthur, et al, 2004). The limitations of the study were that the respondents were of a very small sample of the population and were tested in an artificial situation instead of a real life setting; also they were probably in a good frame of mind, as they were paid $50 to take part in the trial.

However, the success of fear appeals is not so much in question here but still considered relevant to this study, as examining previous studies into the effectiveness of high or low levels of fear, and the levels of anxiety they generate becomes a matter of ethicality when the target market is considered to be vulnerable.

A study that was undertaken in the USA (LaTour, et al, 1997) posed the question of perceived ethicality of an advertisement using a fear appeal message (Arthur, et al, 2004), by undertaking research into women’s responses when shown an advertisement for a stun-gun made specifically for women to be used as protection against attacks. The methodology of the study included showing a video of the product in use in an attack situation; the respondents were then asked a series of questions relating to the levels of fear they felt, the ethicality of the advertisement and its perceived effect on purchasing intentions. The respondents were a random sample picked as representative of the target market from a local shopping mall. The answers were analysed using the Reidenbach and Robin multidimensional ethics scale to measure the ethicality of the advertisement. The data collected showed that the respondents felt the use of fear appeals in advertising were not unethical and they would be more inclined to purchase a product when a high level of fear was used as opposed to a more mild level (LaTour, et al, 1997). However the limitations of the study when looking at ethical decision making are that the results are based on an inadequate sample of the population who would actually see the advertisement, and not necessarily representative of all socio economic classes of women, only ones who could afford to go shopping.
The results of both studies indicate the effectiveness of the use of fear appeals from an advertising stance, and that levels of fear are conducive with the levels of persuasion. However there is also empirical evidence to show that using fear appeals can elicit high levels of anxiety in the recipient causing numerous negative effects (Homer, 1972). Some people have been known to have maladaptive responses when exposed to fear appeals (Janis & Mann, 1997) such as tuning out the message, suppressing their anxiety, and being unable to cope with the unpleasant feelings evoked by the advertisement. According to Homer (1972) “More concern should be given to the ethical aspects of the manner in which consumers are persuaded to buy products through anxiety-arousing advertising”

LaTour & Zahra (1989) suggest that research on the subject of the use of fear appeals in advertising and the effect on purchase intention has provided little evidence to show that fear appeals are likely to influence the audiences purchase intention, and that if they are used, only a low or moderate level of fear should be applied.

However the ethicality of fear appeals is not only based on the content of the advertisement but on the target market chosen (Wolberg, 2005). For example, several companies advertising funeral insurance plans (Real Insurance, Insurance Line) use fear appeals as their message strategy, the advertisements use real people telling the audience of the terrible ordeal of dealing with the death of a loved one, and how their memory will forever be tainted by the fact that they had no money to pay for the funeral, they then go on to say that the situation could of course have been avoided if they had taken out funeral insurance. The content of these advertisements is not so much in question although by exerting emotional pressure they can be defined as manipulative (Hastings, et al, 2004); it is their targeting strategy that is cause for concern. The target audience for funeral insurance plans tend to be people in their middle ages, with low incomes considered vulnerable due to their disadvantaged financial state, and the elderly who are a known vulnerable group.
2.4 Vulnerable Groups

According to Mechanic and Tanner (2007), vulnerable groups are defined as being susceptible to harm and unable to protect their own interests due to a lack of intelligence, education, resources, strength or other numerous contributing factors. The Oxford English Dictionary also cites ‘capable of being persuaded or tempted’ as a definition of the word vulnerable.

Studies have shown that vulnerability is based on certain limitations, physical, cognitive, motivational and social (Wolberg, 2005). The literature also states that there are situations that render people vulnerable for a limited period of time due to their circumstances, and therefore vulnerability is not always considered a permanent state but one that changes depending on certain variables (Wolburg, 2005). However whatever the cause of a persons vulnerability; ensuring they are not taken advantage of should be the main ethical concern for marketers (Wolberg, 2005).

According to Brenkert (1998) marketers shouldn’t target vulnerable groups if the criteria for their campaign are based on the vulnerability of the group. For example, if the message strategy was to use a fear appeal to promote the use of a brand of tires, and the target market was comprised of the elderly, by showing a grandmother crashing a car with her grandchildren as passengers designed specifically to reach such a vulnerable target group, the advertising campaign would be considered unethical.

However according to Brenkert (1998) the notion of vulnerability is hard to define as it is a matter of degree, can be temporary or permanent, and the recipient may not even be aware of their limitations and are therefore less able to protect themselves.

It is known that marketers have the ability to manipulate consumers with their knowledge of the customer’s wants and needs through market research, and their ability to understand the intricacies of the market, whereas the consumer is reliant on personal experience in evaluating marketing efforts, however, in the case of vulnerable groups
who may lack such competencies, special protection is required to ensure they are treated fairly (Wolberg, 2005).

Marketers have a moral obligation to ensure that vulnerable groups are not disadvantaged in the market place by the use of marketing tactics employed to take advantage of their vulnerability. Therefore it is the responsibility of the decision maker in an organisation to ensure that marketing campaigns are chosen from an ethical standpoint and not based purely on monetary gain.

2.5 The Elderly as a Vulnerable Group

According to the ABS website (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009), as of June 2008 out of a population of over two million West Australians, 258,400 were aged 65 years and over, and within that group 30,800 were over 85 years of age, this is an increase of 16.6% and 28.9% respectively, and an indication that there is a substantial market for products aimed at the elderly and a lucrative opportunity for marketers by directing marketing campaigns at an aging population.

According to Marianti and Schroder-Butterfill (2006) the more problems an individual has accrued throughout their life the more vulnerable they become, and that on average an individual can add around 3% of deficits or problems for each year they have lived. This assumption would therefore mean that the elderly have a much higher chance of being vulnerable purely through the number of years they have lived.
2.6 Summary

Ethical marketing decisions should be reached not only by adhering to legal requirements, or by doing what is best for the organisation, but should also be based on the decision makers own moral judgement, whether one is influenced by a teleological or deontological philosophical ideal, there have to be guidelines put in place that not only take the individuals personal philosophy into account, but also the circumstances surrounding the issue to be settled.

The literature review has given a good indication that fear appeals are an effective form of advertising when the target market are able to cope with the information, and deem it relevant to their situation. However several studies (Brenkert, 1998, Wolberg, 2005, and Duke et al, 1993) have also shown that not all target markets have the coping mechanisms to deal with persuasive tactics that are based on increasing levels of anxiety in the recipient.

There also seems to be little evidence to support the use of threatening messages when the audience is known to be of a vulnerable group. Therefore alternatives to fear appeals may be needed when certain groups are being targeted.

There was predominance in the literature of studies that relate to the ethics of marketing harmful products to the vulnerable, but very little information on using fear appeals as a communication tool to the vulnerable. Therefore the review focused on gaining an overall understanding of ethics, fear appeals, and vulnerability in an attempt to help clarify the most appropriate methods to use to undertake research in that area.
CHAPTER 3

3. Research Framework

3.1 Research Focus

The focus of this study was on the population's perception of ethicality when fear appeals were used in advertising to vulnerable target markets, and the perceived effectiveness of the ads. The research tested the theory that even a low level of fear used in a specific advertisement, and the choice of target market, are directly related to how ethical the population perceived the advertisement to be.

There is already empirical evidence that links the levels of fear in fear appeal messages with purchase intention (LaTour, et al, 1997), however this study was designed to expand on previous research by focusing on the vulnerability of the target audience and how that relates to the perceived ethicality of the advertisement.

To test the hypothesis that the population would feel that a more vulnerable audience faced with even a mild level of fear as an appeal was unethical, two scenarios were used as examples of vulnerable and non-vulnerable audiences along with a print advertisement aimed at the elderly as an example of the use of a fear appeal message. The relationship between each variable was then analysed in order to test the strength of the relationship between each condition and the level of ethicality and therefore test the hypothesis.
3.2 Hypothesis

The literature that formed the basis for this study suggests that vulnerable consumers are more likely to be exploited as vulnerability and opportunism go together (Shultz & Holbrook, 2009), and that marketing to the vulnerable without taking into account their vulnerable status is morally unjustified (Brenkert, 1998). Also according to Hastings & Stead (2004) fear appeals can have unintended deleterious effects, such as heightened anxiety among the more vulnerable audiences, again raising the question of the ethicality of this form of advertising.

H1. There will be a significant difference in perceptions of ethicality when targeting vulnerable and non-vulnerable populations with fear appeals.

Figure 1. Research framework

Figure 1 shows how the constructs can be linked together to achieve different outcomes. For example, the level of fear used in advertising and the level of vulnerability that the target audience have is directly related to the level of anxiety that will be experienced, and therefore the perceived ethicality of the use of the fear appeal, in turn this can have an impact on purchase intention.
CHAPTER 4

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

To test the hypothesis an online survey was developed and sent to potential study participants who were invited to take part in the research. The survey required them to look at an advertisement for a funeral plan service under two different conditions (vulnerable and non-vulnerable), and complete an attached questionnaire, “Refer to Appendix 1 for the basic outline of the questionnaire”.

As the focus of this study was on the perceived ethicality of the ad in relation to the audience’s level of vulnerability, the questions were developed to elicit measurable responses to questions and statements that related to the ethicality of the ad from both a vulnerable and non-vulnerable standpoint. Measures included a combination of existing ordinal and interval scales including Likert scales, combined with demographics, creating reliable, relevant and measurable data that could be analysed.

Interval level measures using Likert scales were used to compute items that can be averaged, whereas nominal scales were used for the demographic items that only required dichotomous responses. The items from each condition were then analysed, to ascertain the target population’s opinion from both a vulnerable and non-vulnerable perspective on several constructs including the level of anxiety the ad caused, and the effectiveness of the message appeal on purchase intention.

The commercial used in the survey was indicative of the advertising currently being used by several insurance and funeral companies, and was created in the form of a print advertisement using the threat of a negative outcome to get the audience’s attention, along with information to encourage a change in buyer behaviour.
4.2 Population and Sample

To obtain data representative of the target population, a convenience sample of 155 staff members and students at ECU were sent an online survey, utilising the snowball effect by requesting they pass the email on to friends and colleagues. The diversity of the staff and students at ECU ensured an adequate sample for this study as the sample elements were a fair representation of the population making the sample suitable for inferential analysis, this was a simple one stage selection process and appropriate for this study, as time and financial restraints had to be considered.

4.3 Research Instrument

The questionnaire included several items for each construct, such as the respondent’s attitude towards the message appeal used in the advertisement, the level of anxiety the ad may cause, and the target markets appropriateness, also an item on purchase intention, and a series of demographic items.

To evaluate the perceived ethics of the use of fear appeals to vulnerable target markets the survey respondents were asked to read a scenario (condition 1) that was designed to infer that although the target was elderly they were not considered to be vulnerable, then they were asked to look at a print advertisement for a funeral plan and rate a number of items from strongly agree to strongly disagree with each possible response assigned a numerical value, using the following scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Scale for Questionnaire
The respondents were then asked to read a second scenario (condition 2) that was designed to infer that the audience were not only elderly but were also vulnerable, then to look at the same print ad again and answer the same questions with the second scenario in mind. Respondents were then asked a number of demographic items such as age, gender, marital status, and parental status, to obtain data that could be used to make comparisons between the two conditions.

Table 2. Conditions of Survey

| Condition 1 | John, a 75 year old retiree, has just returned home from playing 9-rounds of golf with his mates. As he sits down to read the paper, Mary, his wife of 50 years, brings him a tall, refreshing drink. Opening the paper at random, the first thing he sees is the Marion & Co Funeral Plan advertisement. |
| Condition 2 | John, a 75 year old retiree, living on a pension, has just returned from therapy after hip replacement surgery. As he sinks wearily into his seat, his wife of 50 years, Mary, brings him the paper and a cup of tea. Opening the paper at random the first thing he sees is the Marion & Co Funeral Plan advertisement. |
Online internet surveys were used in this study as they are an efficient data gathering technique that gives the respondent time to formulate their answers, and the opportunity to view the advertisement in the privacy of their home or office. Also several hypotheses can be tested from one survey. Therefore this form of data collection was deemed appropriate for this study.

However one recognised problem with the use of online surveys is the possibility of a low response rate, and a slow turn-around, however these issues were successfully overcome by following up on the respondents and making the return of the survey as easy as clicking a button.

4.4 Data Collection

A convenience sample of ECU staff and students at the Joondalup campus were sent an email with the survey as an attachment with instructions on how to complete the questionnaire and information on the study being undertaken. The completed surveys were returned through Qualtrics; a private research software company that enables the user to create surveys, build a database, and collect completed responses submitted through their online link. The data was then exported to SPSS to conduct statistical analysis, as SPSS is a statistical computer programme that is capable of in depth analytical procedures suitable for collating and analysing quantitative data.

4.5 Data Analysis

To analyse the data several tests were conducted including frequency tables to provide an insight into the demographic profile of the sample and ANOVA to examine the relationship between demographics and ethical perceptions, Chi-square tests were also used to test the significance of the statistics.
In addressing the research question and hypothesis, sample means of the level of perceived ethicality of the ad with relation to condition 1 (q2, 9) and condition 2 (q3, 9) were analysed and an independent sample t-test was conducted to estimate sampling error. The completed test was then examined to determine whether a two tailed significance of \( p < .05 \) was reported inferring a statistically significant difference between means.

ANOVA was also used to test the level of perceived ethics in condition 1 (q2, 9) when compared to items q2,2 q2,3 q2,8, and q2,11, and the level of perceived ethics in condition 2 (q3,9) when compared to items q3,2, q3,3 q3,8, and q3,11, these tests were used to determine which if any items influenced the respondents perceptions of ethicality. Further analysis looked at the relationship between the vulnerability of the audience and their perceived purchase intention with t-tests to check the significance of the data.

### 4.6.3 Ethical considerations

To undertake this research project several ethical considerations were taken into account which follow the guidelines suggested by Neuman (2006).

- Ethical responsibility rests with the individual researcher
- Do not exploit subjects or students for personal gain
- Some form of informed consent is highly recommended or required
- Honour all guarantees of privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity
- Do not coerce or humiliate subjects
- Identify the sponsor who funded the research
- Make interpretations of results consistent with the data
- Use high methodological standards and strive for accuracy

As a research student at ECU I am also bound by the ethical code of conduct prescribed by the university and subject to the ethics committee
CHAPTER 5

5. Results

5.1 Description of Sample

A total of 155 questionnaires were received by Qualtrics during the data collection process; however 31 questionnaires were discarded as they were incomplete, leaving 124 valid responses to be analysed.

5.1.1 Demographic characteristics

Measures of central tendency were computed to summarise the data for the demographic variables. Measures of dispersion were computed to understand the variability of scores for the demographic variables. Table 3 is a summary of the results of this analysis.

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.Dev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 30</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>59.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 to 50</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 +</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>7.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- A large majority of the sample (82%) were female
- The majority of the sample at just over 59% were younger than 30 years of age, 27% between 31 and 50, and 14% over 51 years of age
- 51.6% of the sample were single, 31% married and 18% other
- Only 33% of the sample had children

The demographic profile of the sample is likely to be attributed to the large number of respondents who were students at ECU. The classes that were asked to participate in the survey were predominantly female, under the age of 30 and single. The staff that participated in the study has however contributed to the range of ages, marital status and parental status that would otherwise have been missing from a sample purely based on students. Table 2 and figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 provide an overview of the demographic characteristics which will be discussed further in relation to the respondent’s ethical views in the next section.
Figure 2. Age distribution by percentage

Figure 3. Gender distribution by percentage
What is your current marital status?

Do you have children?

Figure 4. Marital status by percentage

Figure 5. Parental status by percentage
5.2 Research findings

5.2.1 Ethicality comparisons between conditions

The results showed that the mean score for the ethicality item q2,9 (I consider the ad to be ethical) in condition 1 (non-vulnerable) was 2.90 and the mean score for the same item q3,9 in condition 2 (vulnerable) was 3.04. Although this is only a slight difference a t-test was conducted to ascertain if it had occurred by chance.

5.2.2 Summary of t-test

A paired samples t-test was conducted to compare the means of the level of perceived ethicality in the two conditions (not vulnerable and vulnerable). The results showed there is a significant (Condition 1 $X = 3.04$, $SD = 1.039$) and condition 2 $X = 2.90$, $SD = .953$, $t (123) = -1.987$, $p = 0.049$), if only slight, difference between the two conditions suggesting that levels of perceived vulnerability have an effect on perceived ethicality. Specifically the results suggest that the more vulnerable the target audience is perceived to be, the more unethical the advertisement is perceived. The results indicate that we must fail to reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there is a relationship between perceived vulnerability and perceived ethicality.

5.2.3 ANOVA to test for comparisons between demographics and ethicality

Given that the hypothesis was supported, further analysis was undertaken to ascertain the effects of demographics on the perceived ethicality of the advertisement. To achieve this, a one-way within subjects ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the respondent’s demographic profile on perceived ethicality in both condition 1 and 2. The descriptive results showed that the mean scores in each age range for both conditions were very similar with only a slight difference in the 51+ age group with $M = 3.29$ in
condition 1, and $M = 2.82$ in condition 2. Gender, marital status and parental status all had similar mean levels for both conditions and significance levels far greater than alpha at .05, indicating that any relationship between levels of ethicality and demographics had all occurred purely by chance.

Therefore, one can conclude that demographics have no effect on the perceived ethicality of the advertising, although the older age group more strongly agreed that it was unethical.

### 5.2.3 ANOVA to test for comparisons between ethicality and items q2 & q3 2, 3 ,8 and 11.

An ANOVA was conducted to test for a relationship between item q2,9 (ethicality) and the responses to items q2,2, q2,3, q2,8 and q2,11 and q3,9 and the responses to q3,2, q3,3, q3,8, and q3,11. This analysis was conducted to examine whether the perceived ethicality of the ad was affected by how worried the respondents were about leaving their families in debt having been made aware of the issue, and how uncomfortable the ad made them feel, raising questions as to the possibility of the ads ability to increase anxiety in the recipient.

A comparison between the perceived ethicality of the ad and the third question asking if companies have the right to use whatever means necessary to reach their target market, could give an insight into whether the general population associate marketing practices with ethics. Lastly, the mean scores for the item “ethics have no place in advertising” in condition 1 and 2 if high would indicate that the general population feel that advertising should be governed by ethical constraints when audiences are vulnerable. Tables 6 and 7 show the results of the tests.
Table 4. Ethicality compared to responses for items q2,2, q2,3, q2,8, q2,11 (condition 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q2,2  After watching the ad I am worried about leaving my family in debt</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>1.126</td>
<td>.405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2,3  I feel uncomfortable while I am viewing the ad</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>1.089</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2,8  Companies have the right to use whatever means necessary to reach their target market</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>1.010</td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2,11 Ethics has no place in advertising</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>.968</td>
<td>.827</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the ANOVA suggest that when the ad was viewed from a non-vulnerable perspective the respondents indicated that for q2,2, M = 3.30 (1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree) the majority were not worried about the prospect of leaving their family in debt, and with a sig value of .405 as p > .05, the question of ethicality had no bearing on their responses.

For q2,3, M = 3.02 again the responses were skewed towards strongly disagree, however the sig value at .003 is less than alpha (.05) so perceived ethicality of the ad had a significant effect on the responses to this question. Q2,8, had a mean score of 3.83 showing that respondents disagreed with the question and with a sig value of .009 p < .05 this also means that the question of ethics had a significant effect on their responses and didn’t happen by chance. Q2,11 suggests that respondents strongly disagree that ethics has no place in advertising M = 4.25, but their answers had no relation to q2,9 with a sig value of .827 p > .05.
Table 5. Ethicality compared to responses for items q3,2, q3,3, q3,8, q3,11 (condition 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q3,2  After watching the ad I am worried about leaving my family in debt</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>1.043</td>
<td>.129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3,3  I feel uncomfortable while I am viewing the ad</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>1.067</td>
<td>.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3,8  Companies have the right to use whatever means necessary to reach their target market</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>.969</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3,11 Ethics has no place in advertising</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>.916</td>
<td>.624</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 showed very similar results to table 6, with items q3,3, and q3,8 with sig values at .024 and .000 respectively suggesting again that the results were effected by the respondents level of perceived ethicality of the ad and didn’t occur just by chance, however the level of vulnerability of the target audience had no effect on the way the respondents answered the questions as both condition 1 and condition 2 had very similar means.
5.2.4 Comparisons of purchase intention and vulnerability

Frequency distribution was computed to summarise the data for item q2, 5 and q3, 5 (the person in the scenario is likely to purchase a funeral plan) to allow for comparisons between condition 1 and 2. A paired sample t-test was conducted to test the reliability of the data.

The results showed a slightly higher mean $M = 2.98$ (1 being strongly agree, 5 being strongly disagree) for condition 1 (not-vulnerable) than condition 2 (vulnerable) $M = 2.76$, indicating that purchase intention for the target audience was more likely in condition 2; the vulnerable scenario, suggesting that purchase intention is related to the level of vulnerability the population perceive the audience to have. The t-test revealed a p value of .000 and with an alpha level of .05, $p < 0.05$ indicating that the results did not occur by chance but were due to the level of vulnerability in each condition.

5.2.5 Purchase intentions of respondents

A frequency test was conducted for the last item in the questionnaire (based on the ad, would you seek more information about pre-paid funeral plans?) to ascertain the purchase intentions of the respondents on completion of the questionnaire.

The results showed that 92.7% of the respondents answered negatively, suggesting that the majority of respondents would not consider purchasing a funeral plan even after viewing the advertisement.
CHAPTER 6

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.0 Introduction

This study was looking at how the use of fear appeals to sell products and services are perceived to be unethical when the target audience are considered vulnerable. For this study the vulnerable group were elderly and considered vulnerable due to their age, their social or financial circumstances and their health.

6.1 Summary of the Study

Results showed that there was a slight difference between how the same ad was perceived ethically when the audience were known to be vulnerable as opposed to not-vulnerable. A t-test showed that the difference was significant and not by chance, indicating that the hypothesis which predicted there would be a significant difference in the perceived ethicality of the ad when the audience were known to be vulnerable should be accepted.

Further analysis indicated that the demographic profile of the respondents had no effect on the perceived ethicality of the ad whether the audience were vulnerable or not.

However there was a significant relationship between how uncomfortable the respondents felt when viewing the ad and their perceived ethicality of the ad for both the vulnerable and non-vulnerable conditions, and for the item on whether companies have the right to use whatever means necessary to reach their target audience,
respondents in both conditions disagreed with the statement and a relationship was found to be significant between their perceived ethicality of the ad and their disagreement with the statement.

The relationship between the vulnerability of the audience and how the respondents viewed the likelihood that they would purchase a funeral plan was only slightly more likely under the more vulnerable condition.

The last question the respondents had to answer was if they would seek more information about funeral plans based on the ad, the results showed the majority of the sample (93%) would not.

6.2 Discussion

The results of the current study provide partial support for previous research into fear appeals and the ethicality of advertising to vulnerable populations. LaTour and Zahra (1989) in their study of fear appeals as a marketing strategy found that individuals have different cognitive responses to fear appeals, which in turn have an impact on how a product or service is perceived ethically, therefore influencing purchase intention.

LaTour and Zahra (1989) also suggest that when levels of anxiety are heightened with the use of a threatening message, the audience are likely to have a negative response to the ad and the brand. The results of this study are consistent with this. The current study found that the level of discomfort in viewing the ad had a significant relationship with the perceived ethicality of the ad, and the use of fear as a message appeal was shown by the high negative response to purchase intention to be ineffective as a marketing message.

As mentioned in the literature (Donovan et al, 2003) the ads in this study used anticipatory fear arousal by showing a very sad old women sitting by herself, indicating how bereft she is feeling now she is left to pay for a funeral. This form of advertising
puts pressure on an already vulnerable audience to purchase a product they may not be able to afford, and can therefore be considered as unethical. This results of this study offer empirical evidence that supports this view that the more vulnerable the audience the more unethical the ad is perceived to be.

According to Donovan et al, (2003) the relevance of the topic with the audience has an impact on how the ad is perceived ethically, as the closer the audience are to the subject matter in the ad the more likely they are to respond to it. This view is supported by the current study with results showing that with a sample predominantly under the age of 30 (60%), unmarried (52%) and childless (66%); who would obviously find it hard to relate to being old and having to pay for a funeral, the fact that 93% responded negatively to whether they would consider purchasing a funeral plan after viewing the ad.

6.3 Contributions to Marketing

The contribution this research project will make to marketing is that the results indicate that populations consider fear appeals unethical when the target audience are a known vulnerable group, and having empirical evidence on the subject will give marketers and consumers a better understanding of how certain advertising messages that evoke fear when the choice of target market are deemed vulnerable is unacceptable to the majority, and other forms of advertising message should be used instead.

The research will offer the wider community an insight into how different ad appeals are used by organisations to reach their target audience, and will encourage them to think of the ethical issues surrounding advertising and show them how to use their purchasing power to hold organisations accountable.

Organisations can be encouraged to put in place ethical guidelines for the marketing of their products and services with an emphasis on the choice of target market, based on the research findings.
6.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Limitations of this study include; as mentioned previously, the time constraint that only allowed for a certain number of responses to be collected before analysis was undertaken, and the choice of convenience sampling with a snowballing effect that had to be used in order to obtain a statistically testable number of respondents within the limited time frame.

The financial constraints meant a print advertisement had to be used for the survey rather than a television commercial. Television advertising has the capability to create a more emotionally charged message than print advertising, often with the use of testimonials from real people that evokes more of a sense of validity and a stronger reaction from the audience. The print ad used in this study was an example of a very low fear appeal which may not have elicited the responses that a more hard-hitting ad may have achieved.

Other limitations include the demographic profile of the sample. For example, in this current study the majority of the sample were under the age of 30 (60%) with less life experience than an older group may have, and as ethical evaluations are not only inherently personal, but subjective, experiential and known to change over time, the large proportion of young inexperienced students in the sample is likely to have limited the validity of the results. Further research would benefit from a sample more consistent with the targeted audience or with a more varied age range.

Future studies could take a more in-depth examination of the effects of fear compared with humour as a message appeal on vulnerable audiences, and how purchase intention differs between the two. Several studies have shown that fear is not always effective in influencing behaviour change and can cause the recipient to have a negative attitude to the product or service (LaTour & Zahra, 1989) but less is known of the effect of humour as an appeal when compared with fear when the audience are considered vulnerable.
6.5 Conclusion

This current study was effective in recognising that ethics do play a major role in advertising and buyer decision making, with empirical evidence to show that the general population do perceive ads to be unethical when the audience are known to be vulnerable.

The research also indicated that if marketers choose a fear appeal to target a vulnerable audience for their campaigns, they take the risk that the general population will consider the ads unethical which in turn could result in negative brand association.

The study also highlighted that there is a significant relationship between the perceived ethicality of the ad and how uncomfortable it made the audience feel whether of a vulnerable nature or not. This implies that the use of fear appeals even when considered mild have the ability to increase ones' anxiety and are therefore considered an unethical marketing practice.

The major implications of this study are that the majority of the sample significantly agreed that targeting vulnerable groups is unethical, that fear appeals that cause the recipient to feel uncomfortable are unethical, and that marketers should not be able to use any means necessary to reach their target audience, and as the majority of the sample were under the age of 30 (60%), unmarried (52%) and had no children (66%), marketers should bear in mind that they will be the next generation of parents and grandparents and may want to consider changing their marketing tactics in the future.
References


Appendices

Appendix 1: Information letter to participants

This survey has been sent to you by Stephanie Hutchinson, an Honours student at ECU. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how the general public feel about the use of fear appeals in advertising, and whether the targeting of vulnerable groups is considered to be an ethical marketing practice. The survey will only be used for research purposes as part of an Honours Degree. Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and information within the survey will not be given or sold to any third parties. While I would be pleased to have you participate, I respect your right to decline. There will be no consequences to you if you decide not to participate. It is important that you understand that your involvement is this study is voluntary. If you decide to discontinue participation at any time, you may do so without providing an explanation simply by closing this email. If you withdraw, all information you have provided will be destroyed.

All information gathered will be treated in a confidential manner, and your name will not be included on the survey nor used in any publication arising out of the research. All of the research will be kept in a locked cabinet in the office of Dr. Kate Mizerski, the study supervisor.

Submission of this questionnaire will be deemed to be your consent to participate in my project.

This project has been approved by the ECU Human Research Ethics Committee. However, if you would like to discuss any aspect of this
research please contact Dr Kate Mizerski (k.mizerski@ecu.edu.au) on (61) 8 63045445 who will be happy to discuss any issue relating to the research study.

Alternatively if you have concerns or complaints about the research project and wish to talk to an independent person you may contact:

Research Ethics Officer  
Edith Cowan University  
270 Joondalup Drive  
Joondalup WA 6027  
Phone: +61 8 6304 2170  
Email: research.ethics@ecu.edu.au

I would like to thank you in advance for your assistance with this research project.

On completion please return the survey via the reply function at the bottom of the email.
Appendix 2: Questionnaire

Please read the following scenarios and look at the accompanying advertisement. Then answer the questions by highlighting the appropriate box. There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in how you feel. Thank you in advance for your time.

Scenario 1.

John, a 75 year old retiree, has just returned home from playing 9-rounds of golf with his mates. As he sits down to read the paper, Mary, his wife of 50 years, brings him a tall, refreshing drink. Opening the paper at random, the first thing he sees is the Marion & Co Funeral Plan advertisement.

NOW SCROLL DOWN TO LOOK AT THE PRINT ADVERTISEMENT
Funerals can cost a packet. There are so many things to budget for – the casket, burial plot, flowers and transport are just a few. Money worries are the last thing they need at this time.

Don’t leave your loved ones with your funeral bill

Plan ahead *

Marion & Co Funeral Plan Specialists

Let us take on the burden so you can rest in peace.

* Guaranteed acceptance for Australians aged 18 to 79, absolutely no health questions asked
Please take your time to answer the following questions, there are no right or wrong answers, please tick the box that most closely represents how you feel. Please do not scroll ahead.

Have you ever seen an ad for a prepaid funeral plan?  
☐ Yes  ☐ No

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree, please indicate your agreement with the following questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I find the ad informative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After watching the ad I am worried about leaving my family in debt</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel uncomfortable while I am viewing the ad</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The person in the scenario is likely to be upset by the ad</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The person in the scenario is likely to seek more information about the product</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The person in the scenario is likely to purchase a funeral plan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ad is effective for reaching the target market</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Companies have the right to use whatever means necessary to reach their target market</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I consider the ad to be ethical
The ad is aimed at a group that could be considered vulnerable
Ethics has no place in advertising

Scenario 2.

John, a 75 year old retiree, living on a pension, has just returned from therapy after hip replacement surgery. As he sinks wearily into his seat, his wife of 50 years, Mary, brings him the paper and a cup of tea. Opening the paper at random the first thing he sees is the Marion & Co Funeral Plan advertisement.

NOW SCROLL DOWN TO LOOK AT THE PRINT ADVERTISEMENT
Funerals can cost a packet. There are so many things to budget for – the casket, burial plot, flowers and transport are just a few. Money worries are the last thing they need at this time.

Don’t leave your loved ones with your funeral bill

Plan ahead *

Marion & Co Funeral Plan Specialists

Let us take on the burden so you can rest in peace.

* Guaranteed acceptance for Australians aged 18 to 79, absolutely no health questions asked
On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly agree and 5 being strongly disagree, please indicate your agreement with the following questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I find the ad informative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After watching the ad I am worried about leaving my family in debt</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel uncomfortable while I am viewing the ad</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The person in the scenario is likely to be upset by the ad</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The person in the scenario is likely to seek more information about the product</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The person in the scenario is likely to purchase a funeral plan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ad is effective for reaching the target market</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Companies have the right to use whatever means necessary to reach their target market</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider the ad to be ethical</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ad is aimed at a group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that could be considered vulnerable

Ethics has no place in advertising

ABOUT YOU

Age:  
- < 30 □
- 31 – 50 □
- 51 + □

Gender:  
- Male □
- Female □

Marital status:  
- Married □
- Single □
- Other □

Do you have children?  
- Yes □
- No □

Based on the ad, would you seek more information about prepaid funeral plans?  
- Yes □
- No □

Please return the survey via the reply function at the bottom of the email.

Thank you for your time.