Feeling Fit and Looking Good: The Impact of Materialism, Peer Approval and Sex Appeal on Youth Consumer Perceptions towards Fitness Studio Advertising

Sentirse en forma y tener buen aspecto: El impacto del materialismo, la aprobación de los compañeros y el atractivo sexual en las percepciones de los consumidores jóvenes hacia la publicidad de los gimnasios

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses young Malaysian consumers' perceptions and marketplace behaviour through advertising for aspirational and lifestyle consumption. The aim is to study the impact of aspirational advertising on materialism, peer approval, sex appeal, and body image. The literature review uses marketing and social theories, while the appeals of emotional advertising will be discussed through a case study analysis examining how Malaysian fitness advertisements on digital and social media impact youth attitudes towards physical appearance and through capturing emotional experiences and their association with materialistic values, peer approval and self-image. Findings present a cultural perspective in understanding the current standards of ethical decision-making and what factors are relevant as lifestyle aspects of ethical choices and decision-making for fitness brands among youth consumer market segments. It was found that aspirational advertising for fitness brands in Malaysia is designed to build perceptions that personal consumption choices represent values such as social and peer approval, with less emphasis on materialistic values and body image. This demonstrates that advertising may influence some aspects of materialist, aspirational consumption choices, but peer pressure and cultural values have strong implications on youth consumption behaviour. Some practical recommendations are suggested for marketing practitioners and consumer behaviour researchers to invest, in optimising the power of social media marketing and advertising.

Keywords: Aspirational advertising; Body image; Materialism; Peer approval; Sex appeal.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo aborda las percepciones y el comportamiento en el mercado de los jóvenes consumidores malayos a través de la publicidad de consumo aspiracional y de estilo de vida. El objetivo es estudiar el impacto de la publicidad aspiracional en el materialismo, la aprobación de los compañeros, el atractivo sexual y la imagen corporal. La revisión de la literatura utiliza teorías de marketing y sociales, mientras que los atractivos de la publicidad emocional se discutirán a través de un análisis de caso que examina cómo los anuncios de fitness de Malasia en los medios digitales y sociales impactan en las actitudes de los jóvenes hacia la apariencia física y a través de la captura de experiencias emocionales y su asociación con los valores materialistas, la aprobación de los compañeros y la imagen de sí mismo. Los resultados presentan una perspectiva cultural en la comprensión de las normas actuales de la toma de decisiones éticas y qué factores son relevantes como aspectos del estilo de vida de las opciones éticas y la toma de decisiones para las marcas de fitness entre los segmentos de mercado de los consumidores jóvenes. Se descubrió que la publicidad aspiracional de las marcas de fitness en Malasia está diseñada para crear la percepción de que las elecciones de consumo personal representan valores como la aprobación social y de los compañeros, con menos énfasis en los valores materialistas y la imagen corporal. Esto demuestra que la publicidad puede influir en algunos aspectos de las elecciones de consumo materialista y aspiracional, pero la presión de los compañeros y los valores culturales tienen fuertes implicaciones en el comportamiento de consumo de los jóvenes. Se sugieren algunas recomendaciones prácticas para que los profesionales del marketing y los investigadores del comportamiento del consumidor inviertan en optimizar el poder del marketing y la publicidad en las redes sociales.

Palabras clave: Publicidad aspiracional; Imagen corporal; Materialismo; Aprobación; Atractivo sexual.

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1. Introduction

Advertising, marketing and branding communication have been studied for decades to examine their effectiveness in encouraging consumerism (Mitchell, 1997a). These disciplines are part of the broader field of marketing research, but assumptions differ among advertising practitioners on how different groups such as growing children, adolescents and young adults are found to be variedly influenced in grasping the social realities behind advertising, including the ethical and moral wisdom of individual consumption choices (Korn, 2006).

Adolescents aged between 12 and 19 years are a critical group for cultural research on the impact of advertisements. The frequency and intensity of advertising exposure is commonly linked to a phase of insecurity in the personal and social lives of teenagers. Lifestyle ideals such as materialism and peer approval are fundamental in social attitude formation among dependent-age consumers constantly engaging with media. As digitisation expands markets, consumers are keen to scour and share authentic information about brands, "rather than [hear] what marketers want to say" (Mitchell, 1997b). From varied media access and exposure levels to advertising, attitudinal variances would directly impact consumers' personalities, outlooks, behavioural preferences, and decisions.

The main research objective is to review ethical consumption choices among teenagers in modern society, and *how is advertising produce ethical awareness based on attitudes and perceptions towards three key lifestyle aspects: materialism, peer approval and sex appeal?* Research in a case study examines Malaysian fitness studio advertising which targets youths and influences the development of self-image and materialistic values, and how these result in specific lifestyle choices. The aims of research are to:

- Identify the role of advertising on youth consumption behaviours and decision making.
- Review the impact of materialism, peer approval and self-image on decision making through assessing the effects of aspirational advertising towards body image and fitness.

2. Literature Review

This section presents a review of current marketing literature and theoretical principles of consumption behaviour to understand how aspirational marketing affects the formation of attitudes and perceptions, and the impact of cultural factors in the digital marketing age.

Advertising reflects enjoyment of consumption and social status by communicating individuals' aspirational values and enriching consumers' shared connections. Advertising researchers try to understand the essence of brand personalities, how advertisements reflect self-identity and social interests, and how they correlate with target audience's expectations, behaviours, self-expressions, and experiences (Ansarin & Ozuem, 2014). Brands represent preferences in food, clothing, arts, music, and hobbies, enhancing consumers' ability to acquaint themselves with like-minded people. Companies strive to meet these preferences based on whether those choices are personal or socially motivated. Advertising for marketers becomes a game of one-upmanship:

besides serving and satisfying target markets, brands represent image of excellence especially for competitive lifestyle businesses. Nevertheless, social responsibility is increasingly the basis of brand conversations among consumers, corporations, enterprises, and their stakeholders. Vitally, brand personalities portrayed in advertising must have relevance, salience and significance to the target's characteristics, socioeconomic backgrounds, and lifestyle inclinations (Moreno, 2018). Advertising targeting adolescents specifically, are aimed at creating aspirational values by representing expressions of freedom, fun-seeking, sexuality awareness, adventure, youth culture, etc., thus becoming powerful symbolic identifiers. At the same time, advertising's 'social nature' encourages cultural engagement with others, as social identification via brands connects peers of similar attitudes, values, interests and aspirations, tastes, etc., (Knoll, 2015; Moreno, 2018).

2.1 Digital Marketing and Ethics

In today's digital media context, advertising draws consumers into discussions that are social, political, economic, and moral in nature (Knoll, 2015). Developing, managing, and sustaining brands has evolved from traditional practices of designing advertising, commercials, etc. to communicate one-way marketing messages, to shaping social trends and personalising culturally diverse experiences in the digital marketing age (Valbuena, 2018).

Advertising appeals found in social media marketing strategies shape perceptions of brands (Blazevic et al., 2014; Bowen & Ozuem, 2019). For digital marketing communication practice, the emotional dimension is a fundamental touchpoint of communication in the consumer interaction chain. Self-esteem, self-image, social status become relevant talking points via associative brands, affecting image and expressing inner attributes.

Brands employing advertisements as a social media marketing tactic would involve a suite of psychological associations to show that *value* (material benefits), *emotions* and *personality* are the intrinsic drivers for self-esteem and confidence to attract target consumers seeking social approval and peer acceptance through storytelling and identification with brands (Kasser et al., 2004).

Some researchers have found data suggesting an increased wariness of digital and social media marketing that do not make clear their social responsibility stance or that visibly disappoint target consumers through unethical behaviours (Blazevic et al., 2014). Social media marketers are expected to integrate ethical principles into advertising and brand engagement, and to understand the "marketing comfort" of consumers without heightening the intrusion and irritation some digital consumers already feel towards brands (Jacobson et al., 2020). In this regard, ethical advertising has become an essential issue in consumer culture.

In sum, emotional appeals and ethics are valuable in digital marketing research as educated consumers today increasingly demand stronger ethical actions in transforming attitudes and perspectives, while improving economic and living standards through clear knowledge of what brands stand for. This determines the effectiveness and limitations of communication channels

and methods used, whether through social media or digital content, mobile marketing, AI-based media, or traditional B2B and electronic outlets (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

2.2 Materialism and Self-Esteem

Consumer researcher Russell Belk (1985) defined materialism as "the importance [attached] to worldly possessions", while Richins and Dawson (1992) view it as the priority placed on possessions and their acquisition a "necessary or desirable form of conduct to reach desired end states, including happiness".

Wearing et al. (2013) study a decade ago shown that youth tendency towards "commodified leisure consumption" comes through adopting market constructs and narcissistic behaviours to cover or overcome insecurities. Attitudes towards materialism is observed to start during childhood and further shaped during adolescent years when recognition of brands is associated with exposure via media, parents, and social peers (Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2019).

Different age groups form varied levels of engagement behaviours demonstrating the influence of materialistic values such as loyalty, trust, connection, and satisfaction with brands, word of mouth awareness and etc., (Sugandhi & Vashistha, 2015). This suggests individuals, particularly youth consumers, have stronger potential for social assimilation through displaying materialistic values such as owning lifestyle brands and following trends to attract attention or gain approval.

Some researchers have considered how brain neuroplasticity affect perceptual associations of product desirability, and the degree in which this determines consumption evaluation. Pechmann et al. (2005) state that advertising messages produce behavioural impulses (motivation) towards marketing persuasion from the core values of addictiveness, risk behaviours, and perceived brand benefits. Neuroscientists believe that for some brands, aesthetics valuation over pricing and performance factors imply a strategic brand image approach to take advantage of consumer vulnerability towards impulse purchases due to higher neuroplasticity in the reception of emotional appeals.

In the development of personality and self-identity, engaging consumers through targeted social media advertising produces new approaches in digital marketing. For example, social media advertising on sports equipment and nutritional information, when posted adjacent to user status updates related to exercise or food intake, steer youths towards materialism through ownership of, desire for, and relationship with, brands, goods, and services (Chassiakos et al., 2016). Chassiakos et al. (2016) further show that exposure to agentic influencers such as popular celebrities and icons on digital platforms trigger negative health effects in children and adolescents such as image-related addictions, mental health dysfunctions, and may result in cyber-bullying and social pressures to fit materialist agendas which compromise the maturity of opinions of children and adolescents.

Literature shows that among youth consumers, materialism, and self-esteem ties together. Gentina, Shrum and Rose (2018) argue that adolescent self-valuation correlates with interactional behaviours with peers that result in increased self-esteem, which produces more decisive attitudes as consumers. However, this review found that the relationship between materialism and esteem building through brands have not been deeply studied in the aspect of enhancing *ethical* consumption choices.

Symbolic objectification of self-image is linked with exposure to commercials, advertisements and social trends that emphasise the objects and objectives of material gratification rather than the value of living experiences. The ethics of materialistic values among youth consumers are questioned, as they might cultivate impulsiveness before having had proper guidance in the development of rational attitudes such as value, performance, and consumption confidence beyond trends (Pechmann et al., 2005).

2.3 Peer Approval

Evidence from research demonstrates the need to distinguish adolescent motives of peer approval, and the degree in which this function is skewed towards self-expressiveness, pragmatism, or necessity-based consumption (Ansarin & Ozuem, 2014). The "costs" of these morality choices in the long run include lower self-esteem, insecurity, exposure and gullibility to scams, seeking or buying culturally inappropriate products such as pornography. Barve et al. (2015) study how peer-based insecurity drives youth to emotional advertising. Findings indicate that underdeveloped decision-making may result in irrational decisions and unclear consumption motives.

The theoretical concept of *deviant consumer behaviour* by Moschis and Cox (1989) argued that unregulated morality aspects of consumption are gradually internalised into consumers' psychological or socio-emotional frames. Being surrounded by their peers, youths especially teenagers learn to form opinions and worldviews mainly during social interactions, which influence attitudes towards trends, material ownership, acceptance, or social popularity. The psychological contexts that motivate adolescents' desires for consumption choices are a common subject of studies into addictive behaviours with its correlative taxonomies.

This includes studies on the consumption of substances as coping mechanism, a mode of self-expression and lifestyle aspirations, e.g., drinking beer to feel good, drown one's sorrows, to join the in-crowd, celebrate or have fun (Santos, 2013, pp. 306-332). Young consumers' vulnerability to deviance come from a lack of knowledge and life experiences: ignorance, wilful negligence, e.g., smoking where *No Smoking Signs* are displayed, weak or conflicted morality and self-identity, or are exposed to deceitful and fraudulent behaviours (e.g., peer shoplifting). Consequently, they develop great anxiety about social condemnation or rejection in their choice to display or avoid deviant behaviours (Jongenelis et al., 2018).

Gentina, Rose and Vitell (2016) examine social attitudes towards materialism and peer behaviours, and attribute adolescents' self-esteem to the effects of advertisements. This assumption supports the views theorised by marketing psychologists that elements of respect, admiration and favourable impression is demonstrated through behaviours such as *ownership* and *relationships* with significant others, rather than ethical consumption (Kasser et al., 2004; Chaplin & Roedder, 2007).

The approval of social peers is crucial in consumption. For instance, owning mobile communication devices is especially popular among teenagers from Gen-Y and Gen-Z cohorts, becoming a material necessity that is no longer an option. Attitudes towards perceived "essential" products are formed through emotional advertising and social conversations, which may persuade or pressure youth to continue being part of the brand-making process by implying its necessity for social wellbeing. A study by marketing psychologists Isaksen and Roper (2012) on peer susceptibility to interpersonal influence among British adolescents found correlation between low-income segments' socio-psychological traits such as low self-concept with peer-approved but vicious cycles of bad choices which perpetuates class consumption trends.

These findings suggest a scope of ethical consumption impacts on the youth marketplace of Western countries. In less-developed societies like Malaysia who are experiencing first-hand the effects of marketplace globalisation, the concept of interpersonal influence based on social approval, have not produced much evidence linking advertising to youth self-concept. The existing gap of unavailable literature, institutional actions, and possible solutions will be discussed in this paper.

2.4 Sex Appeal and Body Image

Sexual appeals are globally pervasive persuasion tactics in advertising practice since curiosity about sex is innate. Literature on sexual appeals present the perspectives of Western advertising which is much stereotyped in the general domains of media. Consequently, sex appeal, nudity and explicit images are often employed in Western advertising to incite overt sexualised response (Smith, 2020). Researchers have presented quantitative data to provide insights into this subject. For instance, in a dissertation review of traditional magazines readership, it was cited from media data that out of 600 advertisements, typically 20% of advertising use some form of sexual appeal through innuendo, humour, or fantasy creation that disconnect from the realities of sexual norms and behaviours; a minority of ads (0.7%) show models engaging in sexualised behaviours such as nudity (Korn, 2006).

An abundance of social theories linking the effects of advertising which promote specific attitudes towards physical appearances have been produced by marketing scholars to understand

attitudes towards social consumption behaviours, such as the influences of role models on young adults' purchase intentions and youth perceptions of sex, sexual appeals and sexual identities in advertising (Berger, 2017). Advertisements aimed at exerting influence on teenage mind-sets towards sex appeal, may produce differences in attitudes in the immature stages of their psychosocial development. Martin and Gentry (2013), for instance, applying social comparison theory to understand the use of attractive models, found sex appeal to be a subjective variable among pre-teenage girls learning to form self-perceptions of inadequacies through physical and material comparison.

Cultural perspectives are a key dimension in discussing advertising ethics with regards sex appeal (Berger, 2017). In collectivist cultures, consumers' inclination to try, accept or embrace products or services is associated with cross-cultural dimensions such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance (de Mooij and Hofstede, 2011). This is reflected in consumer attitudes towards physical attraction, sex appeal, and body image as represented in advertisements. Cultural beliefs and value systems underlie what is socially acceptable in advertising and marketing messages, which in turn influence and implicate the complex behavioural motivation and cognitive processes for multicultural consumers' information processing leading to ownership, adoption of innovations, decision making (Valbuena, 2018).

For instance, studies among adolescent female black Americans suggest stronger association between figure fullness and fertility rather than dominant white female population perceptions of slim fantasies (Valbuena, 2018, citing de Mooij, 2005). On the other hand, Hultin and Lundh (2004, p.4) found that body display and other publicly viewed, overt hints of sexual attractions would be considered indecent in Muslim-dominant and other conservative cultures, from Ireland to Mexico to the Philippines.

This is contrasted with the cultural constructs of the self from a Western perspective. The esteem construct represented by Barbie Doll advertisements, for example, implicitly underscore Western marketing persuasion tactics that are designed to shape female consumers' perceptions towards attaining ideal body image through aspirational role models (Dittmar et al., 2006). Portrayal of desirable sexual characteristics are idealised and exemplified in Barbie Doll marketing advertisements. Children and teenagers are exposed to cultural constructs of the sexually idealised self through physical and material attributes deemed to represent perfection such as height, waist and bosom measurements, shape of nose, eyes, and fashionable clothing.

Marketing studies have also linked the sociocultural impacts of idealised appearances, such as objectification of physical bodies through using Instagram or capturing smartphone selfies to be objects of gaze by audiences such as friends and followers (Terán et al., 2019). While increasingly accepted, this phenomenon has also scaled into controversial issues involving cosmetic surgery and aesthetic procedures becoming a normalised societal trend.

To summarise, advertising and consumer research into materialism, peer approval and body image continues to be a key contributor in offering real applications of theoretical perspectives in studying ethical consumption choices, and the formation of attitudes towards sexual appeals in advertisements.

3. Methodology of Research

In examining the interrelatedness of materialistic values, peer approval and self-image, the method utilised is case study research of secondary sources to examine the appeals and indicators of social attitudes.

According to Robert Yin (2014, pp. 10-12), case study analysis, ranging from descriptive, explanatory and exploratory methods, is a contemporaneous type of research enabling researchers to use observations of source evidence (e.g. textual or visual) to clarify social and cultural perspectives, or to probe deeper on issues in current context and relevance, without rigorous dependence on empirical data, bias, or interference from primary research subjects (as interviewees or survey respondents may present). In effect, case study analysis seeks answers to the "how" questions raised in the course of conducting research.

4. Case Study Analysis

In observing how social media marketing and advertising tactics influence consumption behaviours and decision making towards fitness, the main sources of analysis chosen for this paper are digital marketing and social media advertising visuals from Malaysia sources which portray ideal body image and the emotional appeals persuading young consumers to go on a fitness transformation journey focusing on the emotional appeal of physical fitness in forming attitudes towards materialism, peer approval and self-image.

Figure 1a: Celebrity Fitness on Facebook

Source: The Merrier (2020).

Advertisements chosen for analysis in this section represent the creative visual marketing tactics used by two well-established fitness centres in Malaysia with urban youth and young

adult market segments. The aim is to identify emotional appeals which link physical appearance to social approval and to correlate these factors to attitudinal formation towards fitness and wellbeing trends. To conclude, we discuss the emotional element in determining whether social media marketing on fitness are capable in influencing youth consumers in making informed and ethical consumption decisions and how materialism, social approval and body image appeals influence their decision making.

Figure 1b: Celebrity Fitness website

Source: Celebrity Fitness Studio (2022).

For Malaysia, the fitness trend is a profitable lifestyle-based enterprise, with prominent marketing tactics such as branding campaigns and advertisements on social media platforms. The trend is further fuelled by celebrities or image-makers who are branded as idealised vessels of fitness transformation to gain social media followers and popularity. An example is found among fitness "gurus" (icons) who are publicised through media targeted at teenagers and young adults (via websites and social platforms) that address fitness aspirations and youths' desire to attain a healthier, transformed physical image.

Figure 2: Fitness First website homepage and Facebook masthead

Source: Fitness First website homepage. (n.d.).

Figure 1a is a social media advertising exhibit from a popular urban fitness centre with outlets at various urban locations. The advertisement tagline "The More Space, The Merrier" referred to social distance protocols which the loosening of national Covid-19 pandemic regulations had allowed in the third quarter of 2020, when gyms and fitness centres were reopened for business.

Figure 1b shows the same fitness brand's homepage, advertising its proposition to urge consumers to attain their fitness goals *socially*, as represented by several active fitness enthusiasts utilising gym equipment in group settings.

Figure 3: Malaysian fitness gurus on Instagram

Source: Marie France Asia, 2017

Figure 2 is an example of social media and webpage visual by a Malaysian fitness franchise. Its tagline "Progress Is Personal" presents the message of body image enhancement at an individualised pace. The four sub-frames of visuals imply that the methods of fitness are customised based on the client's personalised needs, and whichever method chosen or preferred would ultimately lead the customer to positive outcomes of esteem building.

Figure 4: Malaysian health, fitness, and wellness icons

Source: Tatler Asia, 2019

Additionally, local media platforms regularly publicise a slew of Malaysian Instagram celebrities whose careers are founded on social popularity. Figure 3 and Figure 4 present a sample of two visual exhibits from articles published by two web-based media news outlets published in Malaysia. The online articles feature vibrant montages of celebrities and icons whose names and

images portray encouragement for local consumers to attain healthier bodies or optimal fitness levels through following them on social platform, Instagram. Along with attention-grabbing article headline words such as "fitness gurus", "advocates", these articles communicate social engagement as a success factor in attaining physical image transformation goals through role modelling behaviour.

5. Significance Analysis and Discussion

In analysing the impact of advertising on adolescents, the cases provide insight on emerging market behaviour which attests to the emotional and social roles of advertising influencing materialism, peer approval and sex appeal in digital marketing context.

The case study method is contextually helpful in seeing the prevalence of a phenomenon, as well as predicting the outcomes of consumer decisions. The key insight from this analysis is that digital and social media advertising produces cumulative outcomes of interactions through a raft of associations linking attitudes, values, emotions, and motivational appeals to consumption behaviour. Such messages may affect perceptions of idealised attributes among self-conscious segments seeking social approval for adopted trends.

Research found that Malaysian fitness brands advertise using images based on the social construct, namely that of gaining and improving self-esteem and approval, rather than seeking materialistic goals. Advertising propositions were also found to be culturally conservative, and do not present explicit sexual appeals beyond image-consciousness. Esteem, as argued in literature, is a crucial aspect of personal worth as it motivates the phenomenon of ownership, invoked by various attitudes and behaviours linked to the desire to accepted by certain social circles.

Facing such pressures, youth may wish to avoid alienation and rejection by associating with attitudes and images that identify their personalities and bear the stamp of "approved" social attitudes, as part of youth's reckoning to earn esteem and social confidence. Differing from literature and research findings of Western advertising, however, *Malaysian social media and digital advertisements of fitness concepts are found to carry more collectivistic rather than materialistic values in influencing choices and preferences* for fitness brands.

The fitness advertising's emotional appeals are linked to social approval for desirable body image rather than increasing sex appeal. This suggests that social motives for attaining healthier, fitter bodies help image-conscious Malaysians associate with broader sociocultural aspirations, yet their desire is guided by conservative social norms and values. This concurs with findings by Berger (2017), Hultin and Lundh (2004), Valbuena (2018), and some aspects of Dittmar et al. (2006). Advertisement approaches demonstrate how digital marketing and social media integrates social shifts in consumers' values from materialist to collectivist values, which influences the cultural perspective towards consumption decisions.

Brand value proposition and positioning is considered an emotional aspect of consumption and social interactions. Social engagement with emotional benefits is perceived to be a more "authentic" method to inspire consumption confidence. This is relevant in understanding the impact of advertising among urban youths who spend considerable daily time viewing, enjoying, engaging with, sharing, and commenting on media advertisements and commercials, suggesting that social experiences with brands enhance *information consumption*. This insight has a myriad of strategic applications for local marketers.

Brands should facilitate relevant social conversations among young consumers through ethical advertising. Without proper ethical guidance, vulnerable or ignorant adolescents could develop obsessive attitudes towards body image which might lead to resorting to impulsive ways to recreate aspirational characteristics (crash diets, unapproved health devices or medical procedures, extreme exercise regimes, etc.), augmenting non-rationalised aspects of consumption, which affects ethical judgements. As urban consumption patterns reflect the bigger forces of economic globalisation, marketers need to cultivate less emotionally pressurising approaches in forming aspirational attitudes for informed consumer decision making, and to emphasis on building more equitable social aspirations in enhancing lifestyles and wellbeing, behavioural changes that would likely and substantially shift in the coming decades in terms of diversity and inclusion.

6. Recommendation and Conclusion

Ethical Youths should be taught goal-centred consumption, and mediation opportunities can be found among parents and teenagers such as introducing lessons on planned purchases, seeking high product performance standards, and to appreciate marketing campaigns and advertisements bearing positive messages relating to self-image, social fulfilment, community involvement, and altruism. In this regard, the researcher believes that parents and guardians of Malaysian children and adolescents need to be aware of digital advertising's ethics found on social content that youth are exposed to, and family media literacy via meaningful conversations about entertainment mediums go a long way to mitigate cultural harm from viewing, accessing, and absorbing inappropriate or deceptive messages.

Ethics is a crucial element in marketing practice. Ethics in marketing practices are necessary to ensure commercial branding strategies enable fair evaluation consumption preferences by teaching ground principles of fairness, integrity, honesty, and social responsibility, and to ensure materialistic attitudes and behaviours are not under the sway of peer pressure. Consistent regulatory monitoring and updating of marketing codes of conduct help affirm ethical values while strengthening guidelines for socially responsible businesses to enhance consumer confidence in fitness brands which employ advertising or campaigns to communicate messages to youth consumers on social platforms.

Future research in consumer engagement or social media marketing should focus on educating adolescents on reporting of misleading, fraudulent, and manipulative advertising. There must be legitimate channels for young consumers to voice out and question when tactics do not adhere to ethical codes, and where the influence of social trends lead vulnerable consumers astray from cultural norms.

This paper found evidence of Western-biased literature on ethical advertising, but a different cultural paradigm seems to be at work for less individualistic, more collectivist consumer societies such as Malaysia, where peer and social approval take precedence over materialistic values. Due to this gap, it is proposed more localised research be conducted by marketing scholars and branding associations and agencies in collaboration with public institutions by offering marketing or advertising-related consumer programmes and activities.

Qualitative research could gather primary data in addressing localised factors (such as social influencers) which boost ethical branding potential through assessing youth's willingness to engage in positive social conversations beyond material needs, peer approval and self-image. Quantitative studies such as focus groups among rural or geographically distanced segments may help to evaluate the degree of ethical advertising awareness in distinguishing the influence of peer pressures faced by adolescents adopting trends for social approval.

Ethical advertising must affirm brands' positive role in raising living standards through advertising messages and images that serve as valuable benchmarks for the social aspirations of developing adolescents. For academic researchers, it is recommended that equal priority be placed in studying the role of advertising in arousing interest towards healthy physical appearance as in creating sexual interest through understanding socio-cultural appeals.

Image issues related to health or medical conditions such as disabilities or eating disorders should continue to be debated as a key topic among experts in psychology, social science, mental health, and body image research. It is encouraging that social conversations surrounding diversity and inclusion have already infiltrated digital marketing domains, for example, Barbie Dolls which bear diverse physical and image attributes (Figure 5).

Figure 5: The Barbie Fashionista line-up featuring dolls with vitiligo skin condition, sitting in wheelchair, and wearing a hearing aid

Source: Barbie Fashionista, 2022

In concluding, advertisements are trend-starters; their social influence via materialism, peer pressure and self-image are impossible to avoid. Brand relationships can exist in beneficial ways associated with self-identification, beside influencing consumption preferences, and improving social interactions. Ethical consumption decisions are crucial in their role to boost adolescents' maturity self-esteem and confidence. However, conflicting dilemmas arise when teenagers do not effectively gain gratification and respect from emotional consumption benefits that has not been rightly earned from experiences. It became clear through this research that emotional advertising appeals of self-image may cause adolescent and young adult consumers to try different ways to balance "what I want" and "what society sees of me". Resolving such ethical issues involve all stakeholders: marketers, parents, celebrities, role models, social advocates, regulators, and educators.

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