The world is changing rapidly today and in its footsteps our core values are changing too. The last two decades on account of globalization have seen an unparalleled change, which has expressed itself in the form of diminishing community values and weakening ethical principles. Social values are getting eroded, moral values have become fragmented and the society is facing an unprecedented cultural evasion. Our society today is taking on new values, which are at loggerheads with the time tested and religiously accepted principles of our society. In the wake of such changes, it becomes imperative to understand what we mean by ethics and values.

1.1 Ethics and Value System

Ethics is a normative discipline, which specifies the uprightness of various codes of conduct. It deals with specific claims regarding what is right and what is wrong and makes judgments about what ought to be done and what ought to be avoided. Some dictionary definitions of ethics are as follows:

“Ethics is the branch of knowledge, which deals with moral principles.”

The Oxford Dictionary

“Ethics, also called moral philosophy, is the discipline concerned with what is morally good and bad. The term also applies to any system or theory of moral values and principles.”

The Britannica Dictionary

Many authors have also tried to define ethics. Some of the often-quoted definitions are those given by Aristotle and Reay.

“Ethics is an attempt to find out our highest good.”

Aristotle

“Ethics is a set of principles concerning proper conduct.”

Jed A. Reay
Though a violation of ethics may indirectly influence any or all facets of human life, it is directly known to compromise value systems in general and social values in particular. Values and value system may be defined as follows:

“Values are principles or standards of behavior. They may also be defined as one’s judgment of what is important in life.”

The Oxford Dictionary

“Value is a concept that describes the beliefs of an individual or culture. A set of values may be placed into the notion of a value system.”

Jay Fiset

Values and value systems take a long time to develop and refine. However, they can very easily be voided in the light of improper stimuli. One such important stimulus is violation of ethics in television commercials (Roy, 2006) It challenges the enduring beliefs and ideals, which are the pillars of civilized societies and proves damaging to morality and conventionality.

1.2 Advertising and Advertising Ethics

Communication sets the foundation of a truly democratic society, and enacts as a catalyst in bringing about social change and development. No longer is it a subsidiary service, it is rather a fundamental service and a vital institution of contemporary society. One of the strongest and most pervasive mediums of communication is advertising. Some representation definitions of advertising are as follows:

“The business of trying to persuade people to buy products.”

Webster Dictionary

“Advertising is any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods and services.”

Phillip Kotler

Advertising is believed to have a deep impact on human behavior and value system (Foley, 1997). Its content is considered extremely impressionable and hence a number of researchers have expressed concern over the appropriateness and ethics of advertising messages (Rotzoll, 1986). In this context, it becomes important to understand what constitutes advertising ethics.
Advertising ethics is a special form of applied ethics, which scrutinizes the rules and regulations in the context of advertising; the myriad of social, cultural or moral complications that may arise when advertising campaigns are developed; and the specific obligations of all engaged in the development and communication of these campaigns. It covers the various ethical issues and phenomena associated with the advertising campaigns of corporate houses. Foley (1997) has defined advertising ethics as: “Advertising ethics is the branch of study that calls to attention the moral principles and norms relevant to advertising communications.”

John Foley, President, Vatican City

Advertisers use various modes, newspaper, radio, television, internet etc. to reach their target audience. Though all these modes are effective in their own way, in India, television is known to be the most effective, with the maximum reach.

1.3 The Reach and Overwhelming Influence of Television

Television in India, which to start with was used by the government as a developmental tool with restricted reach, has today surfaced as one of the biggest entertainment industries of the world. Owing to its easy affordability (Mayne, 2000), it has become a household commodity and the most popular means of entertainment. Its total reach in India as of 2011 is 416.51 million (Hawkes, 2011). This indicates that television in India has penetrated even the remotest of areas.

On account of its reach and omnipresence, it has become an active influence on the members of the society and its impact can be seen in “relationships, economic decisions, political awareness, participation and the world wide view” (Johnson, 2001) of the viewers. It is further believed to “influence the economic, social and political landscape of life” (Johnson, 2001). Television is today considered a “particularly effective medium of social influence” (Salzman, 1993). What viewers are exposed to on television generally becomes a ‘norm’ in modern society. It is believed that even though it may not be its intention, discourses on television regarding the standards of public and private virtues and the set of ethical principles displayed thereon, directly or indirectly influence the thoughts, actions and in turn the behavior of the viewers.
Television today is playing a “powerful role as informer, educator and purveyor of modern views” (Al-Ghabri, 2006).

Most adults spend between 18000 and 20000 hours in a year watching television (Sohn, 1982) and children on an average spend 25 hours a week on television viewing (Frank, 1983). From these statistics it is safe to assume that television watching is habitual, ritualistic ((Barwise and Ethrenberg, 1988) and one of the most popular pastimes of people.

The widespread popularity and the overwhelming social and cultural influence of television can be attributed to two significant factors, the first one being its wide scope, which covers myriad of programs. Numerous channels cater to all tastes and age groups. New advancements in satellite technologies, the rich assortment of programs aired and the increased duration of telecast have all contributed towards increasing the scope, reach and influence of television. The second factor, which enhances the influence of television is its easy universal presence and the general convenience associated with it. Salzman claims that television watching is a “pleasant, gratifying and unthreatening activity” (Salzman, 1993). He opines that the viewer watches television at his leisure, in his home in an easy relaxed atmosphere and himself decides what to watch and for how long. All these characteristics make television watching a particularly unique activity and explain its deep pervasive influence on culture and society.

Having established the role of television in contemporary life, it is equally important to acknowledge its responsibility as a dispenser of ideas and a medium of social and cultural change. What needs to be understood is that, “the immediate impact and widespread direct visual appeal of television could produce both positive and negative consequences and create impressions that may be long lasting though unintended” (Usha, 2004).

Talking about these impressions, in an interesting study, Liebes and Livingstone (1998) found that people watched television to “discover new life styles, validate ideas, beliefs and aspirations, find answers to their questions, to relax, to socialize and to enhance their image of the self and their view of the world.” Around the same time, Pryor and Crage (2000) found that some of the biggest liars appeared as characters on
television. Given the findings of both these studies, the situation is worrisome as television is “well endowed with the outlines of moral decisions taken and provides the bones on which moral argumentation is developed.” (Slade, 1998).

Given this kind of hold of television on our lives, it must be made sure that its content is healthy and worthy of making an impact on the lives of the viewers.

1.4 Television and Advertising

While viewing television, one comes across innumerable images and commercials for various products daily. This excessive amount of audio and visual media in our day-to-day lives cannot be side lined and impacts all those surrounded by it. Since, we all are consumers of televised messages and advertisements, howsoever hard we might try not to conform to it, there is no alternative. It is an expression of the society of which we are a part, its mirror image for all practical purposes and has a far-reaching influence on the social, cultural and moral values of its inmates (Ciochetto, 2004). In the current context, as long back as 1961, Kelmen, in his Theory of Social Influence, argued that the process of opinion change starts when an individual is exposed to a communicator. This happens because the process of identification comes into play, whereby the individual who is being communicated to develops a desire to establish or maintain a satisfying, self-defining relationship with the communicator (Kelman, 1961).

The world is in a state of transition, a transition characterized by the disintegration of tradition, distortion of core values and fragmentation of social and moral principles. And given the influence of televised messages on the society, a large part of the responsibility for this must be borne by the television commercials (henceforth TVCs) and also the unethical practices of the business and corporate houses, which develop and sponsor them.

As has already been discussed, the reach of television is widespread. Commercial television channels have entered the remotest of areas and most adults are exposed to thousands of advertisements annually, making television advertising an all-encompassing and omnipresent medium of communication. It is everywhere and assails all our senses – sight, hearing, touch and even smell in some cases (Paymal, 2007). Just
as advertisements are difficult to escape, their influence on our lives is difficult to resist (Pollay, 2000). Today they have shaped into a potent medium of communication that perpetuates points of view in the society, which gradually get translated into public opinion. The advocates of the cultivation theory believe that over a period of time viewers tend to accept the world created by advertisers as a reality (Fullerton and Kendrick, 2000). Given this argument, advertisers need to be wary of the ideologies and messages they propagate.

Modern generations and contemporary society have become advertising savvy and make use of it to legitimize issues (Olien et al., 1989) and confer status on things of importance (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1975). It is further believed by critics that advertising because of its status and reach, wields a great power over us. It is believed to “profoundly impact the way people understand themselves and the world around them, including values and behavior” (Foley, 1997). This it achieves through its secondary role in the society; its primary responsibility however remains selling products and in some cases ideas and lifestyles too.

Off late, a number of debates have been going on about the ethical issues in advertising and the catastrophic consequences of improper advertising have been brought to the forefront. Critics have been worried about its intended or unintended influences on our everyday lives and the variety of social ills perpetuated by it. They have been mainly concerned about the ethical problems of advertisements directed at children (Conna et al., 1994; Childs and Maher, 2003; Tamburro et al., 2004), advertisements using sex appeals (Henthrone and LaTour, 1994; Pollay, 2000), stereotypical advertising (Coltrane and Messineo, 2000), alcohol/tobacco advertising (Pechmann and Shih, 1999; Luke et al., 2000; Saffer and Dave, 2003; Bansal et al., 2004; Sinha, 2005), advertisements promoting materialism (Richins, 1995) and deceptive advertising (Burns et al., 2005; Drumwright and Murphy, 2009). They further believe that the ill effects of these advertisements generally manifest themselves in the form of an adverse effect on child psychology (Haefner, 1991), human behavior (Lavine et al., 1999), value system and perception (Roy, 2006), rise of consumerism and corruption (Nuta, 2009), consumption of harmful products (Atkin, 1987), decreased integrity and self confidence of the women (Chatterji, 2005; Schaffter, 2006) and
degradation of relationships in families. Although there exists no unanimous opinion about these ill effects, the concerns and protests that one come across in past research are very serious. Let us discuss some of the ethical breaches with which advertising is charged.

1.5 All Invasive and Coercive Nature of Advertising

The world around us is replete with advertising and try as hard as we might, there is no escape. There are times when we consciously subject ourselves to it, but at other times, it catches us unawares. It is ubiquitous and reaches us wherever we are. At home, it is in newspapers, on the television and even on our shampoo bottle. When we step out of the house, it is on billboards, hoardings, on the windows of shops and just about everywhere in sight. At work, it is on every Internet site that we log on to and on the walls of the café where we eat. If we go out to eat at a fast food restaurant, it is on the menu card. If we park our car in a public parking, it is on the pamphlet that we find on our windscreen when we come back. When we receive the annual reports of the companies in which we have invested, it is in them. When we try to take loans, it comes along with the loan processing documents. We cannot escape them.

Advertising today is a huge business and the existence of many industries (like the cable TV industry, newspapers, magazines etc.) is dependent on the inflow of money that it brings. As a result, advertisers try all types of tricks to get attention, and in certain cases this leads to the invasion of privacy of the individual (Rotzoll, 1986). Although, in most cases exposure to an advertisement can be avoided if an individual so desires (by changing the channel or not reading an advertisement in a newspaper/magazine), but there are instances where this avoidance may not be easy. To cite an example: it is not easy to avoid exposure to advertisements in public places and public transport vehicles. Thus, there arises a strong ethical concern, because exposure to advertising is not entirely voluntary. Further, it can be said that ethical concerns also arise where the individual exposed to an advertisement is not aware of the exposure, as in the case of press releases in which the sponsor is unidentified, or in case of disguised advertising which is not perceived as being sponsored (Nabenzahl and Jaffe, 1998).
Taking this argument ahead, it can be said that previous research is indicative of advertising’s interference with the purchase decision. In many consumers, desire to buy the product is induced by advertising and that too against the consumer’s will (Crisp, 1987). In a study conducted in USA, changes in brain activity that occur when people process advertising images were studied (Cranston, 2004). An attempt was made to ascertain what kind of images would increase sales. Study results were used to seek the ‘buy button’ in the minds of the viewers. Doesn’t the resultant advertising amount to coercion?

Such advertising not only takes away the freedom of choice from the consumer, but also violates his autonomy, coercing him to buy the advertised products.

1.6 Deception and Misinformation

There arises a big question mark where the honesty and truthfulness of the representations and claims made in the advertisements are concerned. Although advertisements might avoid outright lies, they rely on illegal, underhand or dirty tricks to sell products (Burns et al., 2005). They try all sorts of tricks to get our attention and are ready to stop at nothing. They do not even shy away from making false claims which mislead and deceive the viewers (Drumwright and Murphy, 2009) and susceptible as the viewers are to the charms of advertising, they get easily swayed. In certain cases this leads to wrong actions, but in acute cases it might also end up causing injury.

Reference:

The glamorous models and images depicted in the advertisements for weight loss products misinform the target audience. The claims made in such advertisements in most cases are unsubstantiated and injure the interest of the parties who consume these products believing that they are taking due treatment for obesity/overweight.

As we can see, an ethical issue is involved where deceptive advertising is concerned, because the way it can be interpreted has the potential to harm the viewers.

Furthermore, TVCs confuse the target audience. In an attempt to undermine the products of the competitor, rivals unnecessarily degrade the products of their
competitors and make claims, which are unsubstantiated, incomplete and quite often false. The confusion thus created in the minds of the viewers, interferes with their purchase decision.

We can thus say that deceptive advertising is being openly allowed and in a world in which corporate persuasion is endlessly circulating, it is difficult to distinguish the truth from the lies.

1.7 Advertising and Children

Young minds are very impressionable. They constantly learn by picking up cues from their environment. In fact their development is a sum of their interaction with and reaction to the environment (Hunt, 1969). The important question now is what constitutes the environment of a child?

Research has shown that one of the most important constituents of a child’s environment is advertising (Conna et al., 1994) and it has a significant potential to influence children (Haefner, 1991). On account of it therefore, critics have expressed numerous concerns over it (Pechmann and Shih, 1999). In this context, let us take a look at the situation at hand.

At present, morally reprehensible campaigns of the advertisers directed at children are rampant, though not evident in all cases. Their social irresponsibility and unethical advertising practices have the ability to manipulate children and teenagers and thus the exposure of the children to the vast number of televised advertising messages has raised many concerns about advertisements aimed at children. The most common of these concerns are the promotion of harmful products among children, early awareness of sexuality among children and teenagers, disagreement with parents over the purchase/use of advertised products and finally the circumvention of parental authority (Conna et al., 1994). A basic ethical issue is involved here as children cannot assess commercial manipulation and easily get swayed by advertisements.

Regarding the promotion of harmful products among children, it can be said that when children are exposed to tobacco or alcohol advertisements, their curiosity regarding these products is aroused, which positively influences their intention to experiment with them (Pechmann and Shih, 1999). In their perception, the social
stature of the person who uses these products enhances (Sinha, 2005). This thus encourages the use of tobacco and alcohol among children.

Also, with the huge amount of advertising directed at children, the purchase and consumption of the advertised products among children is on the rise. Children are easy targets for advertisers because they cannot assess advertising messages and are easily influenced by ads. This not only is leading to the emergence of the “kid consumer,” who relies less and less on the choice of the parents for the purchase of products, but also promotes the consumption of unhealthy products by the children (Childs and Maher, 2003) e.g. sweets, maggi, artificial soups etc.

Within the same context, it can be further said that TVCs negatively affect relationships between parents and children. The advertisements directed at children encourage them to circumvent parental authority where decisions regarding the purchase of the advertised products are concerned (Atkin, 1987). This encourages conflict between parents and children.

Further, the use of sexual appeals in TVCs adversely affects children, as it makes them aware of their sexuality at an early age (Kunkel, 1992). Youngsters are bombarded with sex related stimuli in TVCs, and the common side effects are sexual obsession and gratuitous sex. These have an unfavorable influence on the psyche of children and perpetuate values among them, which are not in tune with the traditional Indian values.

It is also believed that via TVCs children view a significant amount of violence and unsafe behavior (Tamburro, 2004). Since children are vulnerable and impressionable, they try to imitate what they see in TVCs. This in certain cases is known to have dire consequences.

All in all, it can be said that advertisements have the potential to influence children and teenagers and the advertisers have been adept at exploiting this potential.

1.8 Advertising and Women

On account of the gender hierarchy that is deeply entrenched in our society, women are at a social disadvantage. Their situation is further worsened by the way they are portrayed in advertisements. On account of it therefore, criticism has been leveled
against many advertisers for the way they depict women in advertisements. In fact gender issues in advertisements are among the most researched and criticized areas of advertising ethics (Hyman et al., 1994).

Researchers are worried about the undesirable gender hierarchy perpetuated by advertisements, which goes in the favor of men (Courtney and Whipple, 1983), much to the detriment of women. Commonly cited issues which have aroused the concern of feminists and researchers are limited focus on women (Tuchman, 1979), gender stereotypes (Furnham et al., 2000), gender asymmetry (Stern and Taylor, 1997), authoritative and dominant representation of men as compared to women (Coltrane and Messineo, 2000) and emphasis on patriarchy (Lee, 2004).

Past research has accused advertisements of reinforcing power roles, which establish the secondary position of women in the society (Mayne, 2000). Evidence is found which points to the sexist way in which women (not enjoying the same rights as men) are portrayed in advertisements (Royo-Vela et al., 2007). It is believed that this patronizes women (Sharpe, 1976) and locks them into subordination. Advertising thus privileges the already privileged male gender (Schaffter, 2006) by highlighting the dominant male ideology and surprisingly advertisers refrain from questioning this domination (Radhakrishnan, 2001).

Advertisers are found to extent their preference for the male gender even to advertisements, which target children. Even these commercials predominantly feature males and their dominance increases proportionately with the age of the characters (Browne, 1998). This acts as an important source of discrimination and the development and maintenance of prejudices among children (Graves, 1999).

It may be of interest to point out here that gender preference is also evident in advertisements for products, which are gender neutral (Childs and Maher, 2003). The examples of education advertising and financial services advertising can be cited here. It can thus be said that within advertising men are the norm and it is their institutions and standards that prevail (Spender, 1980). It can thus be rightfully said that that the portrayal of women in advertisements is completely in synchronization with the views of Lord Tennyson expressed as follows:
'Man for the field and woman for the hearth,
Man for the sword and for the needle she,
Man with the head and woman with the heart,
Man to command and women to obey…’

Alfred Tennyson

However, of all the stereotypical ways in which a woman is portrayed in advertisements, particularly troublesome is the undue focus on her as sex object. Scantily clad women can be seen in many advertisements irrespective of their relation with the product advertised.

Reference:

The TVC for JK cement currently aired on a number of television channels in India excessively exposes the female model in the advertisement and is offending in the extreme. What is of interest is that the use of the female model in the advertisement and her undue exposure has no relation what so ever with the product advertised.

This excessive sexuality in cases is a threat to accepted standards of decency and deeply wounds the integrity and dignity of women. In some cases it has been categorized as pornography (Pollay, 1986). Advertisements which are sexually explicit, narrowly depict women only in one role – as sex objects. These advertisements are acutely degrading for women.

It may not be amiss to point out here that since the advent of advertising, sex and advertisements have been tied together. Images and themes, packed with sexual innuendos have been used extensively by advertisers to sell products and for a long time now, have been the reason for many controversies. Advertisers must show due concern for the emotional responses that sex in advertisements arouses in the viewers. It is believed that the use of sexual appeals in advertising goes a long way in shaping the sexual attitudes of the viewers and enhances sexual preoccupation in the viewers. (Pollay, 1986). This is not appropriate for a society prone to sexual violence. A natural corollary to this is rise in crime and violence against women.

Another way in which advertising puts an already disadvantaged segment of the society to a greater disadvantage is when women are exposed to perfect advertising
images. “Exposure to idealized advertising images raises comparison standards for attractiveness and lowers satisfaction with one’s own attractiveness” (Richins, 1991). Its consequences manifest themselves in the form of dissatisfaction with the self, loss of self respect, feelings of inadequacy, eating disorders etc. (Lavine et al., 1999).

References:

For years in India, the Fair and Lovely campaign has been promoting fairness as a symbol of beauty and in turn success. The advertisements of Fair and Lovely portray unsuccessful women from different walks of life becoming successful overnight when their skin tone lightens as a result of the use of the fairness cream. In a particular advertisement of this product, an ambitious dark woman is ridiculed, which suggests that fairness is a prerequisite to success. Promotion of a beauty cream from this point of view is not only grossly unethical and offensive, but also a moral outrage, as majority of Indian women have a dusky complexion and when they compare themselves with the models used in the commercial, their confidence in the way they look reduces.

In a study conducted in New Zealand, Fay and Price (1994) found linkage between the use of thin models in advertising and the rise in the incidence of anorexia nervosa. The authors suggested that the use of thin models in advertisements was an important element in a complex set of events and circumstances that have sad consequences which manifest themselves in the form of eating disorders and diminished self-esteem among women.

Let us at this juncture, peep into the implications of the way women are portrayed in advertisements. The subtlety of the roles that women play in advertisements suggests that they are inferior to men, but of greater concern is the implication that they are individuals of no consequence. Their stereotypical portrayals of good homemakers with no decision-making powers emphasize on patriarchy and reinforce the already well-established prejudices against them in the society.

Behaviors and roles, which are befitting of both sexes, are learnt through the process of socialization and advertisements play an important part in that (Johnson, 2001). They perpetuate gender appropriate behaviors and roles in the society. With
advertisements perpetuating the suitable roles for a woman as that of a mother, housewife and caretaker of the family only, they are definitely putting her at a disadvantage in the society.

Also, the role of a woman in advertisements shapes the expectations that the society has from her (Fullerton and Kendrick, 2000). Since in advertisements, she is seldom shown as having a life and opinions of her own, with her entire existence confined to the house, the society starts expecting the same from her in real life. The way she is portrayed in advertisements thus works in her disfavor and puts her in a further unenviable position than she already is.

Certain critics feel that advertising is only mirroring the truth (Courtney and Whipple, 1983). The truth as on date however is that, it is not. The traditional image of the woman has undergone a change. Today, she is a career woman and the ‘modern woman’ finds it difficult to identify with the woman shown in advertisements. While the life of the woman in advertisements is limited to the house only, the contemporary woman’s life extends beyond it. She has interests outside the house too and acknowledges them without guilt or shame. Her portrayal in advertisements thus is ineffective and unrealistic as it fails to follow the footsteps of social change and portray her as she is.

Another line of thought is that advertisements only portray what is acceptable to the society (Mayne, 2000). Its formats are time tested and in synchronization with popular public opinion. Since, women in advertisements are only depicted as housewives and mothers; the implication is that the society is not yet ready to accept her in her more forward roles of a career woman and as equal to man.

In a society where women are fighting hard to gain equality, it is not fair to represent her as secondary or inferior to men. With their participation on the rise in all spheres, be it sports, politics, business, science or even the armed forces, the way she is ‘put down’ by advertisements is inappropriate and hence needs to be checked.

1.9 Materialism and Financial Stress

Advertising in contemporary society is designed to attract attention, influence attitudes and modify behavior. It has facilitated a change in societal virtues that has
invited a lot of criticism (Pollay, 2000; Roy, 2006). It has been accused of promoting undesirable value schemes that see the hitherto unaccepted principles as commonplace. One such principle is consumerism. A significant and positive relationship between consumerism and advertising has been established by a number of studies (Richins, 1995; Roy, 2006; Chan and Cai, 2009). Let us see how advertisements achieve it.

Every end has a means and from the point of view of advertising that means is buying. If we want to spend some quality time with our family members, we need to buy a holiday package. If we want to secure the future of our children, we need to buy insurance policies. If we want to look beautiful, we need to buy beauty products. If we want to lose weight, we need to buy slimming products. If we want status in the society, we need to buy a big car. The list is endless.

How does our brain process these messages and what is the outcome of exposure to these advertisements? Exposure to advertising images leads the viewers to compare and identify, though often at a subconscious level, their own lives with the lives of the characters in the advertisements, particularly with respect to material possessions (Kelman, 1961). This generally leads to discontent with current possessions and an enhanced desire for more (Richins, 1991). The carefully crafted imagery in advertisements works on the minds of the viewers and instills in them a desire to purchase the advertised product, whether or not they need it (Richins, 1995; Ciochetto, 2004). Advertisements thus lead to need creation where it originally does not exist or where the consumer may have no use of the advertised product.

Advertisements on one hand, by coercing consumers to buy products they have no use of and on the other, by making dishonest claims are propagating a fantastic culture, which is financially unaffordable by most and places too much importance on material goods (Roy, 2006). A natural corollary is escalation of materialism in the society (Rumbo, 2002; Osmonbekov et al., 2009).

1.9.1 Why Materialism?

Promotion of materialism by advertisements can be viewed from two different angles. While it is mostly considered unfavorable, it has some very definite benefits. It has the potential to improve economies by raising the standard of living of the people
(Andrews et al., 1994). As advertisements are the single most important source of information on new products and ideas and encourage experimentation with them, they are harbingers of an advanced lifestyle. Also, by advancing honest and ethically responsible competition, they lead to economic and human development (Foley, 1997).

1.9.2 Why not Materialism?

On the other hand however, preoccupation with materialism adversely influences the psychological (Richins, 1995), social (Pollay, 2000) and financial well being of individuals (Nuta, 2009). Historically, it has been treated as a negative value, associated with envy, possessiveness, miserliness, greed and jealousy (Belk, 1983). Individuals who endorse this value strongly are self-centered (Tilikidou and Delistavrou, 2004) and believe in overindulgence and ostentation. They measure their happiness, success and self-fulfillment in terms of their material possessions and their lives revolve around earning and spending money (Leiss, 1976). In the bargain, they suffer from life-work imbalance and put their personal and social safety in jeopardy. This deteriorates their quality of life (Tatzel, 2002).

Status in the society today is a function of the material possessions of an individual (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Thanks to advertisers, a high position in the society is very closely associated with some products, which have been positioned as status symbols (Cahill, 1993). This breeds social competitiveness and private materialism is increasingly becoming a life goal of individuals. Viewers are forever trying to fulfill the gap between their lifestyles and the lifestyles they see in advertisements through increased consumption (Richins, 1991).

The craftsmanship of advertisers is remarkable. Through the artful semblance of images and messages, they are able to evoke the requisite response in the viewers: first desire and then purchase (Spurgin, 2003). What repercussions does such a manipulation in the behavior of the viewers have on their finances?

Sayers, an ardent critique of advertising, as long back as 1933, explained this influence thus:

...the comparatively poor, ...those who, aching for a luxury beyond their reach and for a leisure ever denied them, could be bullied or wheedled into spending
their few hardly won shillings on whatever might give them, if only for a moment, a leisured and luxurious illusion (Sayers, 1933, p. 153, cited in Aleba, 2006).

With spending on the rise, savings are getting downplayed and where people do not have the resources to buy the advertised product, there is no hesitation in resorting to loans (Sangkhawasi and Johri, 2007). In fact, advertisements for all products, which call for a huge investment (like flats), almost always are accompanied by information on loan options. Apart from this, advertisements for loans by various banks and financial institutions are also rampant. Advertisements in this way not only encourage people to buy products they cannot afford by resorting to loans they lack the capacity to pay back, but also threaten the financial stability of economies. To cite an example of how regular taking loans has become, a personal incident may be discussed. My friend had bought a new car and I asked him how much it had cost him. I was very amused to hear his answer. He told me that it costs him fifteen thousand rupees a month. When asked to explain, I came to know that he was paying an EMI of twelve thousand rupees and the running expenditure of the car was approximately three thousand rupees a month. The new generations are living on the edge and increasingly endorsing western values which are at loggerheads with the time tested Indian maxim of “simple living.”

What can we expect? It is not uncommon to hear people complaining of financial stress and frustration. They are prepared to work long hours, even at the cost of their personal well-being and psychological health (Kasser, 2002). They have only one aim – have more than the others.

In acute cases materialists are also ready to commit crimes (Muncy and Eastman, 1998) or even steal (Sangkhawasi and Johri, 2007) to fulfill their materialistic desires. With corruption already being one of the major challenges that our nation is facing, escalation of these tendencies by ethically irresponsible advertising needs to be checked.

It is time to question the responsibility of the advertisers in promoting unrestrained consumption and proliferating various social ills in its wake.
1.10 Cultural Contradictions

New openness in TVCs is rendering them inappropriate to be watched with the entire family. With a majority of the Indian population living in the joint family system, the use of sexual appeals in TVCs makes them unfit for being watched with elders and children alike. The Indian culture does not permit it. Hence, it can also be said that TVCs are at loggerheads with our traditions and culture.

Further, globalization is an idea, which has come from outside and it has its own genetic traits. It has ushered in advertising campaigns not originally designed for our markets. These campaigns are thus not suitable for our country.

References:

In the advertisement of Fa (a brand of Henkel, Germany) deodorant, the unwanted exposure of a woman and nudity (acceptable in certain cultures, but definitely not in India) render it inappropriate for being aired in India. This advertisement was not originally designed for the Indian audience and it may be relevant to point out that the same advertisement is being aired in a number of different countries.

The advertisement for Levis jeans aired in India, originally developed for the American market uses a very strong overt sexual appeal which makes the advertisement unfit for being viewed in Indian homes. Its content is not only in conflict with the basic Indian values, but also causes embarrassment when watched with the entire family in the traditional Indian joint family system.

Further, an excessive focus on material possessions created by advertisements is also a cultural contradiction, since the Indian values and culture preach otherwise.

It can thus be concluded that the speed, complexity and the direction in which the TVCs are moving today, have generated enormous social tension that we have failed to tackle head-on. The situation as on date is that via these commercials, power has been transferred to business houses that have consistently ignored the social implications of their actions. The problem is fundamental, as the unethical content of TVCs is damaging for not only society, but morality too.
Having discussed the consequences of unethical advertising on the society, the need is to develop mechanisms to prevent the harm that such advertising is causing. It is time to seriously examine the ethics of current advertising campaigns, revamp the unethical ones and develop new campaigns, which respond to ethical issues. Past research has already established that advertisements influence the society and the behavior of its inmates (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1975). It is thus time to ensure that only good content is supplied to the society. Stress must be laid on developing ethically responsible television commercials and closer attention must be paid to the values and beliefs that the viewers may draw upon when exposed to them.

Advertisers/Advertising agencies day in and day out are faced with very intricate ethical choices, wherein they are required to balance two conflicting criteria – profit motive and social responsibility. The call of the hour is thus to undertake research on how to protect the society from the harmful effects of advertising, as it “has the potential to assist managers and policy makers as they make very difficult choices about communicating with their respective publics” (Zinkhan, 1994).