Running head: PETA ADVERTISING

PETA Advertising: A Look into the Ethics of Animal Rights Advertising

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Studies of ethical principles applied to advertising have been conducted many times in past research, especially in correlation to the portrayal of women in advertising. However, PETA’s advertising depicts a combination of controversial, objectified advertising in conjunction with animal rights activism, which has made PETA one of the most controversial organizations in history.

Past research on feministic ethics applied to PETA advertising has not been conducted, only analogies and opinions from theorists have been given. In Lesli Pace’s journal article *Image Events and PETA’s Anti-Fur Campaign*, Kevin DeLucas critiques the past work of rhetorical critic’s Kathryn Olson and G. Thomas Goodnight who focused on the discourse rather than the importance of imaging within the anti-fur campaign (Pace, 2005) Deluca states, “Image events create additional possibilities for debate because they offer multiple alternatives for arguments in the public sphere (Pace, 2005).” Laura Mulvey, another theorist better highlights on a feminist objective approach through her two contradictory effects that occur with sexualized advertising. The first effect describes the pleasure of using another person as the object of stimulation through sight, while the second emphasizes the relation of the ego’s desire to be identified with the image seen (Pace, 2005.) The theoretical framework presented from the theorists that’s Pace highlights in her article are situated at various ethical standpoints, yet don’t provide enough analysis through the use of visual images and campaigns to apply as past research conducted on an ethical critique in conjunction with PETA advertising.

This ethical critique will examine PETA’s over sexualized advertising containing females, the most controversial PETA advertisements, and advertising using males using both Feminist Ethics and the Objective Theory.

The importance of the critique is to highlight the ethical concerns that PETA is instilling when trying to secure the rights for animals, and gain activism participation through their use of over sexualized and discriminative advertising.

Brief Overview of the Organization

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) is a fairly new organization dating back to 1980 when founder and president Ingrid Newkirk gathered close friends to aid in local protests to fight for animal rights (Mizejewski, 2001.) Newkirk began the organization with an aim to reduce animal abuse when she migrated to Maryland from India. She was particularly surprised at the conditions of the animal shelters where she would drop off stray animals and decided to take action (Welch, 2000.) The organization has since sprung from only 5 activists when just forming in the early 80’s; to over 700,000 current supporters of the animal rights group (Mizejewski, 2001.) According to the mission on the PETA website, “PETA is dedicated to establishing and defending the rights of all animals. PETA operates under the simple principle that animals are not ours to eat, wear experiment on, or use for entertainment. PETA educates policymakers and the public about animal abuse and promotes kind treatment of animals (PETA History).” However, it didn’t take the organization long to earn a reputation as being one of the most “hip” animal activists groups through its celebrity endorsements and appearances in printed media over 7,500 in just 1999 alone (Welch, 2000). Although the company has stuck by its core values and complied itself off the Animal Welfare, it may be speculated that the radical advertising techniques posed by the organization cause great ethical concern.

Printed Advertisements

**A) Fur**

Although PETA has hosted a series of campaigns, one of the first and most well-known is the “I’d Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur” campaign, which has hosted a series of female celebrities and began its mark in 1990 (Deckha, 2008) although not all the advertisements contain nudity, the majority of them contain almost full or partial nudity.

The first noted printed advertisement for the “I’d Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur” campaign was of supermodel Christy Turlington, which appeared on a billboard along Sunset Boulevard in 1992 (Fur Is Dead)

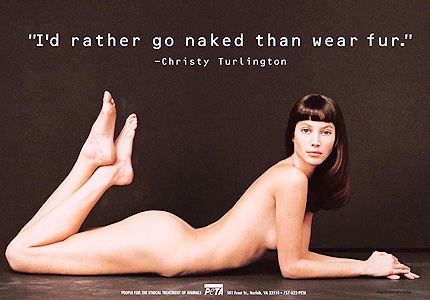


Figure 1: Christy Turlington in the first “I’d Rather Go Naked than Wear Fur” advertisement. Courtesy: www.virginamedia.com

Turlington is completely nude in the photo, with only her arms and the floor protecting her from complete exposure. The sexualized advertisement was the first of its kind and caused a stir amongst the people in the Los Angeles area. However, the organization didn’t stop there and in 1994 took the campaign worldwide by plastering buses with advertising in Norway during the Winter Olympics (Fur Is Dead). The 1990’s were highly progressive for the organization that began using models and celebrities to help endorse the cause across the globe.

One of the latest controversial advertisements released in the campaign is the “topless” edition, which features the girls of Rick’s Cabaret, an iconic strip club featuring some of the nation’s most beautiful dancers (The Girls). The photo involves 7 women, complete with makeup and styled hair positioned with their hands covering their breasts, large stiletto heels, and small thong underwear. The facial expressions of the women seductive in nature, with pouting lips and confidence reflected in their eyes.



Figure 2: The dancers of Rick’s Cabaret posing topless for PETA’s “I’d Rather Go Nude Than Wear Fur” campaign.

Courtesy: www.greendaily.com

Lastly, the last advertisement for the campaign that will be examined under the campaign is infamous reality star Khloe Karadashian’s photo, which is the latest released advertisement for “I’d Rather Go Naked than Wear Fur” campaign. Speaking out on the PETA hosted website [www.furisdead.com](http://www.furisdead.com), Khloe admits that she didn’t understand what happened to animals until the organization presented her with chilling videos. The star now claims that through the advertisement she wants people to know she agreed to pose naked out of the seriousness of doing her part (Khloe Kardashian). The reality star bears all with animalistic looking hair, and only her hands to conceal her from complete exposure, while a great amount of photo editing has been conducted to give the curvy star smooth, and glowing skin. The advertisement also contains small font located in the left hand corner that reads, “Animals killed for their fur are electrocuted, drowned, beaten, and often skinned alive. Be comfortable in your own skin. Let animals keep theirs.”



Fig. 3: Reality star Khloe Kardashian bearing

All in the latest advertisement appearing in the

“I’d Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur” campaign.

Courtesy: www.mylifetime.com

**B) Most Controversial**

The Super Bowl is one of the most popular venues for advertising, and PETA had wanted to take part in the phenomenon during the 2009 game with their video advertisement “Veggie Love.” The commercial features women in partial or full nudity, licking and rubbing vegetables across their bodies. The scene sets the woman in various locations throughout a mansion, such as in the bathtub and by the piano, as font runs across the screen, “Vegetarians Have Better Sex.” In a statement released by PETA’s spokesperson Michael McGraw he states, “It’s ridiculous that this commercial was banned… the bottom line for this ad was the studies that show vegetarians have better sex (Super Bowl).” Ultimately the advertisement was rejected from airing during the Super Bowl XLIII game.

![PETA.pdf](data:application/pdf;base64,)

Figure 4: PETA’s commercial “Veggie Love,” which was rejected from airing during Super Bowl XLIII for being too sexually explicit.

Images Courtesy: www.youtube.com

In 1999, after three years of hiatus from campaigns, PETA released another one of its most controversial advertisements depicting the lower half a female’s body in underwear. The image contains pubic hair, which is noticeably coming out of the sides of the woman’s underwear. In bold font placed underneath the image reads,” Fur trim. Unattractive.” According to PETA, the advertisement caused controversy, especially from the National Organization for Woman that stated:

This is a gratuitous and insulting image that makes its point at the expense of women… It is ironic that PETA, an organization that works so hard to counter what the mainstream media tells women about what need to do to be considered beautiful, would do so with an image that reinforces beauty standards that are oppressive to woman (Pace, 2005).



Figure 5: PETA’s Fur Trim advertisement released in 1999, depicting woman’s pubic hair as being unattractive

Courtesy: www.furisdead.com

**C) Men in advertisements**

Although this ethical critique is primarily focused on the objectification of women in PETA’s advertising, men have appeared in numerous ads which are worth looking at in comparison to the relationship of women. The first advertisement is part of the “I’d Rather Go Naked than Wear Fur” campaign, which highlights both Todd Oldham, noted designer, and Kathy Najimy, Actress in the CBS drama NUMB3RS and former Broadway star (Biography). The picture appears to be a holiday issue’s play on Mr. and Mrs. Clause. Both Najimy and Oldham are completely nude, minus Santa caps and an ornate tree covering their exposed bodies. Oldham is grabbing the breast of the Nijimy, while flashing a smirk Nijimy, wearing red lipstick and the appearance of a white wig, is portraying a seductive, and some-what comic personality by flashing a wink. The position of Najimy in the photo suggests that she is the dominant sexualized character of the two, yet she is highly dependent on Oldham to prevent her from complete exposure.

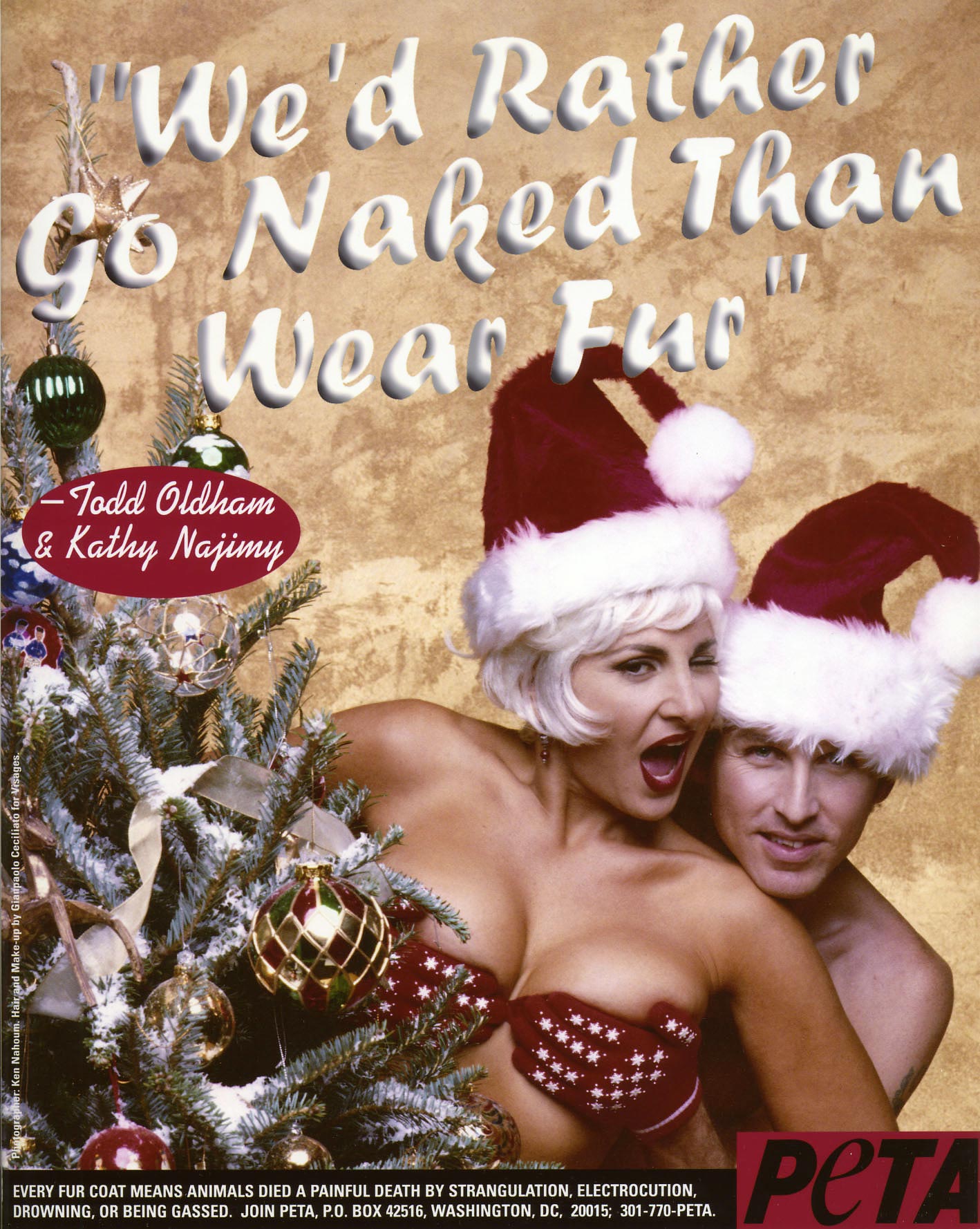
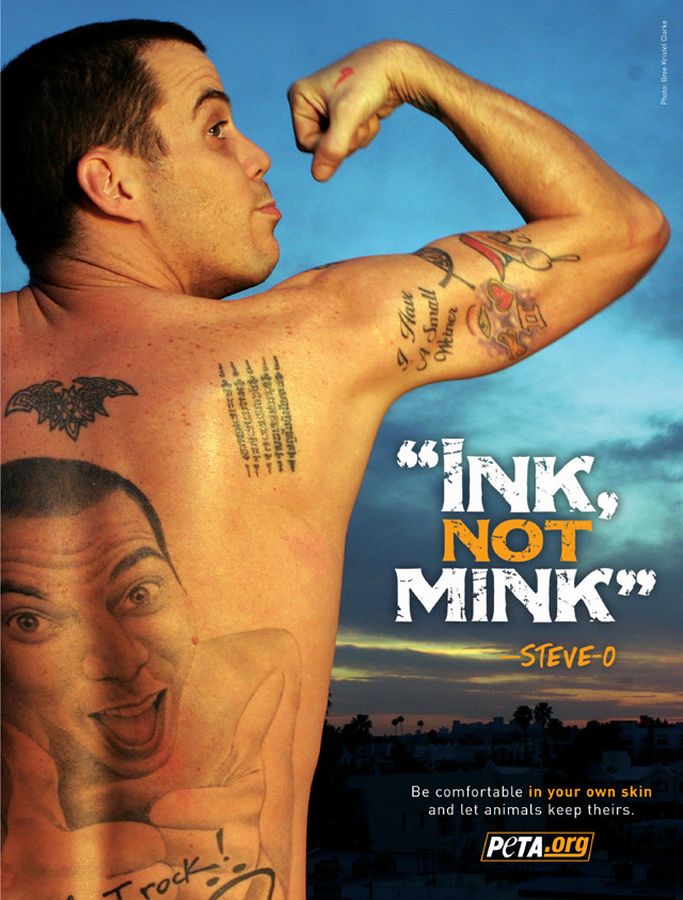


Figure 6: Actress and Broadway star Kathy Najimy and Designer Todd Oldham pose together in a campaign advertisement produced by PETA

Courtesy: www.genderblenderblog.com

The second form of male advertisement used for the ethical critique is fun and fearless MTV Jackass stunt man Stephen Glover, better known as Steve-O. In an interview with PETA, Steve-O stated, “Abuse yourself all you want, just leave animals out of it. Don’t wear fur (Fur Is Dead).” The photo of Steve-O published for the organization included a photo of him flexing his muscles, meanwhile showcasing his series of tattoo’s, including a funny self-portrait of the stuntman giving the “thumbs up.” Steve-O portrays a carefree attitude in the photo, which is what he is most notoriously known-for being the face behind some of the most life threatening stunts performed. The font on the right side reads, “Ink Not Mink,” giving suggestion to tattoo art as an alternative for eating or consuming meat.



Courtesy: www.furisdead.com

ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

1. **Feminist Ethics**

Feminist Ethics, according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, is an attempt to revise, reformulate or rethink traditional ethics to the extent it depreciates or devalues women’s moral experience. Feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar faults traditional ethics in five ways. The ones that apply to this ethical critique of PETA are:

1. Traditional Ethics shows less concern for women’s as opposed to men’s issues and interests
2. Women are not morally mature or as deep as men.
3. Traditional Ethics overrates culturally masculine traits such as: independence, domination, and intellect while underrating culturally feminine traits such as: interdependence, body, and emotion (Tong, Williams, 2009).

Essentially all feminist ethics share the same goal: the creation of gendered ethics that aims to eliminate oppression of any group, especially women (Jaggar, 1992). However, the branch of feminist ethics that best applies to the sexualization of women in PETA advertising is *Ecofeminist Ethics*, which according to Josephine Donovan is,

Possible—-indeed, necessary—-to ground that ethic in an emotional and spiritual conversation with nonhuman life forms. Out of a women's relational culture of caring and attentive love, therefore, emerges the basis for a feminist ethic for the treatment of animals. We should not kill, eat, torture, and exploit animals because they do not want to be so treated, and we know that. If we listen, we can hear them” (Donovan, Adams, 2007).

1. **Objectification Theory**

Although this ethical critique didn’t research the findings of those who viewed his advertisements and their reactions, the fundamentals of the Objectification Theory can still be applied to the artifacts. Objectification Theory, primarily focused in American culture, proposes that the sexualized objective images we are subjected to carry psychological costs that form self-consciousness (Fredrickson, Roberts, 1997).

Self-objectification can be triggered by media images, which in turn affect the impact on the way women view society and culture. In an experiment conducted in conjunction with the Objectification Theory found that passive exposure to extremely thin women caused anxiety on the perceivers’ concept of their own appearance in comparison with the standards of beauty set in images by the media (Fredrickson, Roberts, 1997). Through the images released by the media, gender differences and stereotypes present itself, where male physical ideals still present themselves – through muscles – their sexuality isn’t emphasized as much as a females when trying to sell (Fredrickson, Roberts, 1997).

APPLICATION

Both the Objective Theory and Feminist Perspective can apply separately and in conjunction to each artifact from the various PETA campaigns.

The printed campaign “I’d Rather Go Naked than Wear Fur” advertisements released over the past 15 years still correlate with the same idea: sex sales. Each photo contains almost full nudity, with both the breasts and the butt only being concealed by a hand placement or almost non-existent G-string thong. In comparison to the advertising including the males, the bodies are positioned in a sexualized manner of embracing the body in a confident, domineering manner. The advertisements have switched the traditional ethical standards of male domination over the females in advertising images, and position the celebrities to roles of independence and confidence. The fact that there are no animals presented in the picture, may not only support *Ecofeminist Ethics*, but also violate them at the same time. The fact that the women are taking a stand for animal advocacy may support the notion of women taking an “emotional” stand for non-human animals. On the other hand, the women are objecting themselves in order to bring attention to the objected (abused animals). The Real Fur campaign may also violate the ethical standards of the Objective Theory in the sense that the use of image editing and airbrushed make-up. The advertisements aren’t asking anything in particular of those viewing the photo, they are simply stating, “I” would rather be naked than wear fur. In that case, it seems to be sending out a message of the need to idolize the celebrity for their contribution to PETA, and then possibly proceed to support the organization instead of the organization promoting the positive things the celebrities are doing to aid in the fight against animal cruelty. In order to obtain the information of the celebrity and their stand alongside the organization, you have to venture on the web site, and even so the company still highlights the beauty and popularity of the celebrity. The same concepts apply for the highly controversial advertisements released by PETA except are heightened and serve more of an ethical threat to a feministic and objective standpoint.

The fur trim advertisement (Fig. 5) poses great ethical concern, suggesting that “wearing” pubic hair would be the equivalent of wearing animal fur, when there really is no direct relation at all. The Objective Theory would suggest that image might reinforce societal standards of what is considered “normal” for a woman who has hit puberty to have. It’s objectifying a group of women and suggesting that areas of their body are unattractive, which feminist ethics would argue is devaluing to a woman.

The way that men are represented through PETA advertising is much different than the over-sexualization of the women. The male advertisements, in particular Steve-O’s, highlight on gender stereotyping. Although the photo isn’t trying to sell sex, it is trying to reiterate the dominate “cool” factor by suggesting that in place of consuming animal meat or fur, one should replace the habit with permanent ink. In the Todd Oldham and Kathy Najimy holiday ad, the feministic approach would find the roles of the woman and the man to not be equal. The woman is portrayed as the dominant figure, while the male is simply her prop, concealing her breasts. The hand positioning may suggest that Najimy is dependent on Oldham for sexualized exposure, meanwhile the seductive wink on her face, which is unseen by Oldham, shows her dominance and control over the situation. The holiday ad has very little to do with animal advocacy minus the organization name and barely readable mission statement located at the bottom. Once again, as seen in the previous advertisements, the company is shifting the focus off of animal oppression and presenting an ethical issue of subjecting the celebrities to objectification.

Implications/Conclusions

After examining and applying ethics to the well-known and controversial PETA campaigns, it’s apparent that the organization is trying to combat an ethical issue of animal cruelty by subjecting its’ advertising to already existing concerns over objectification of sexuality and stereotyping. The problem with feministic ethics is that there are so many branches, that some might argue the domination of women is empowering. In the advertisements, particularly the one containing Todd Oldham and Kathy Najimy, there doesn’t seem to be a clear connection of the typical male dominance over women. In fact, it may be argued from the facial expressions and position of Najimy in front of Oldham suggests that she is the dominant force. However, there is great ethical concern with the usage of superficiality and nudity in advocating and promoting a serious cause. Not only did applying ethical perspectives to the campaigns reaffirm that the already controversial tactics are unethical, but also the objectification of women through modern ethical concerns and dominant roles are something our society isn’t used to seeing in traditional unethical objectification.

If PETA wanted to partake in advertising that was considered more ethical than the current and past ads, the company would better need to focus on depicting the oppressed (abused animals) rather than advocating nudity through the use of celebrities and models. However, being known as a radical advocacy group, the President Ingrid Newkirk has said, "We are complete press sluts. It is our obligation. We would be worthless if we were just polite and did not make any waves" (Specter, 2003). With that being said, the organization recognizes unethical behavior and controversy and condones such behavior with the idea of it being the only effective way to bring change.

Considering the organization uses various media outlets for advertisements, future research could include coded research on the different campaigns and media outlets, which would better find consistency in the findings of whether or not PETA is unethical in feminist and objectification perspectives.

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