



## **Arsht Research on Ethics and Community Grant**

### **Autonomy and the Ethics of Advertising**

**2011-2012**

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### **Abstract**

Over the last couple decades there has been persistent debate about the ethics of advertising – especially about whether advertising undermines our capacities for autonomy (self-governance) or not. Most of this debate has assumed a rational and individualistic conception of autonomy, which focuses on our ability to make isolated personal choices on the basis of rational assessments of evidence. This is indeed an important aspect of autonomy but it leaves out the highly significant role that socio-cultural identities, self-conceptions, and emotions play in our decision making. As recent writers on the nature of autonomy have emphasized, we can achieve true autonomy only if the identities, self-conceptions, and emotions that shape our conduct are ones that we freely shape or endorse; and our ability to achieve this type of robust autonomy is strongly affected by various social-cultural forces. Taking these facts into account gives one both a new way of assessing advertising's influence and of deciding when it is beneficial and when it is pernicious.

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