

## **Influence of Controversial Advertisement on Consumer Behavior**

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### **Abstract**

Along with other factors affecting human behavior, mass media advertising is a very useful tool to influence consumer behavior, on a large scale. But, one important issue related to advertisements is controversial advertising. It is observed that when the advertisements are perceived controversial by people, such advertisements create negative effects not only on product or brand, but also affect the organizational reputation. It is evident that there is a relationship between advertisements and consumer behavior, but there is still an extreme lack of research articulating relationship between controversial advertisements and consumer behavior. Scholars also suggested that there is a need to consider and investigate what are the nature of consumers in controversial & offensive ads and how do they respond to controversial ads differently.

**Key words:** Advertisements, Controversial Advertisements, Consumer Behavior

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### **Introduction**

Along with other factors affecting human behavior, mass media advertising is a very useful tool to influence consumer behavior, on a large scale (Bakht, Arif, Zafar, & Nawaz, 2013). The primary importance in advertising is given to the consumer behavior. Television is the most popular form of mass media in telecasting advertising campaigns (Uddin, 2014). Advertisements are generally aimed at increasing purchase intentions through generating favorable attitudes toward the product or brand being advertised (Sunde, 2014). Indeed, as stated by You, Zhang

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and Koyama (2013) “A positive attitude towards advertisements could be used to predict consumer behavior, such as purchase intentions” (p. 225). It is widely acknowledged that attitude toward advertisement depends not only on the physical stimuli, but also on the stimuli’s relation to the surrounding fields. Audience reacts positively or negatively to an advertisement based on the meaning assigned to the advertisement (Naseri, & Tamam, 2012).

Advertising is an essential part of any business and it has got importance because it increases the profit and helps to achieve goals. Business companies all over the world spends billions of dollars for advertising on an annually basis to promote their products or services and to persuade customers globally (M. Nooh, 2009). One of the issues related to the advertisement is controversial advertising. Chaidaroon and Polyorat (2008) mentioned that when the ads are unintentionally controversial, they can lead to unintended negative consequences which may be harmful to organizational reputation and people who receive the message from the campaigns find the controversial ads too offensive that negatively affect their consumption behavior.

Vos (2011) stated that two different categories of controversial advertising can be identified, namely that which relates to controversial and offensive products such as condoms; and offensive executions of advertisements. It is ultimately the latter category, which includes racist, sexist, or violent executions, which could objectively offend consumers. The offense caused by a product, rather than the advertising of such product, such as a condom, may generate negative responses. There are some advertisements e.g., condom advertisements which contain both elements, i.e., offensive executions and controversial products and such advertisements considered more offensive and controversial and creates more negative effects on consumers.

For accepting or rejecting any product at the societal level, whole society or significant portion of the society takes decisions about the acceptance or rejection of anything and society takes its decision within its social context. After the rejection of any product at the societal level, it is very difficult or near to impossible to promote such products. All those products which disturb the social, cultural, moral or religious segment of the society, considered as controversial.

### **Problem Statement**

Literature shows that television advertisements can overcome the knowledge/practice gap about condom use (Mustafa, Afreen, & Hashmi, 2008). Critics argue that mass media advertising play with emotions and feelings of people to persuade them towards specific product, services or idea (Arens, 2014). Scholars

also suggested that there is a need to consider and investigate what are the nature of consumers in controversial & offensive ads and how do they respond to offensive ads differently (Hadzalic & Akervall, 2011; Waller, Deshpande, & Erdogan, 2013; Amor, Ghachem, Garrouch, & Mzoughi, 2014).

Several studies showed that there is a positive relationship between advertisements and consumer behavior, but very little amount of studies were found which examined the relationship between controversial advertisements and consumer behavior. So there is a need to investigate the relationship between controversial advertisements and consumer behavior. This study will provide insight in regards to controversial advertisements and its relation with consumer behavior.

### **Research Objective**

To determine the relationship between controversial advertisements and consumer behavior.

### **Literature Review**

Advertising exposure is a presentation of an advertisement to the consumer. Advertisers attempt to estimate the number of exposures necessary to achieve their objective (Martin, 2015). Alabdali (2010) suggest that advertisements stimuli have potential to formulate, shape or reshape the attitudes of consumers. It is also widely accepted by research scholars that advertisements can stimulate behavioral intentions through influencing attitudes (Sunde, 2014).

Ajzen (2012) said that persuasive communication techniques can be used to produce changes in explicit and implicit attitudes as well as changes in attitudes that can influence later behavior. To produce lasting changes in attitudes that can influence later behavior, a persuasive message must contain strong arguments and the receivers must be motivated and capable of processing and elaborating on these arguments. Social psychology literature reveals that every reaction of people base on their attitude (Comrey & Newmeyer, 1965). Attitude toward the advertisements is defined as “a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner toward advertisements, or the viewer like or unlike the advertisements” (Lutz, 1985; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989; Muda, Musa, & Putit, 2014).

Zanot (1984) report described that there were negative attitude about advertising during 1960s and 1970s among the general audience. Shavitt, Lowrey and Haefner (1998) mentioned that negative attitudes toward advertising reduced over time, some researches also indicated that the negative attitude of people about advertising replaced with favorable attitudes.

According to Bergh and Katz (1999) attitudes are very important research elements. They stated that study of attitudes is one of the most important methods of understanding people's perceptions and their acceptance or rejection of advertising messages and attitude is a good way of evaluating people's liking or disliking about objects, ideas, people or issues (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard, & Hogg, 2009). Literature of advertising shows that marketers are more interested to create positive attitudes of the audience, so they can get more profit after selling their products (Mittal, 1994). But even more important questions are that what are the factors which influence audience attitude? (Bamoriya & Singh, 2011).

Tan and Chia (2007) stated that there are large numbers of concepts which are the basis of attitudes of people about any object, person, event or issue. Every attitude has its own foundation(s) which guides the person to think in particular way and possess cognition and feelings about object (Comrey & Newmeyer, 1965). Tan and Chia (2007) said that peoples' attitude towards advertising has its own foundation(s) that may vary person to person.

### **Controversial advertisements and consumer behavior**

Tehrani, Tehrani and Moghadam (2014) stated that advertising in 21st century plays a very important role, but despite of its role it is also being criticized because of promotion of materialistic values, manipulation of facts and eroding credibility. These criticisms indicate destruction of audience attention and attitude about a product or brand which lead to the potential loss in the market. Alabdali (2010) suggest that advertisements stimuli have potential to formulate, shape or reshape the attitudes of consumers, so marketers and advertisers should focus on these aspects to develop positive attitude of consumers regarding their products, services or ideas. When advertising is perceived to be offensive, annoying, deceptive, insulting or overly manipulative audience is likely to perceive it as irritating and unwanted. Some scholars commented that advertisers use such controversial things in advertisements deliberately because they want to get attention of audience which can also annoy the audience (Sandage & Leckenby, 1980; Rettie, Robinson, & Jenner, 2001) which is also known as irritation (Kornias, Halalau, & Mullern, 2012).

Advertisers sometimes use controversial advertisements in order to lure more of audiences' attention and to "cut through the clutter" (Allam, 2013). Media, advertisers and agencies are the three core players of any advertising campaign. Yet, no party among the three listed ones has taken any initiative to establish or raise any ethical values and principles for any advertising campaign in order to have an obvious list of the offensive advertisements (Mostafa, 2011). Therefore, several academic scholars, in various countries, have started to examine people's attitudes towards

controversial advertising by examining different variables, such as gender, age, class, religion, culture, level of education, etc. (Ting & Run, 2012).

A survey was conducted at COMSATS Institute of Information Technology at Lahore in Pakistan of 168 graduate students to test their level of offensiveness towards TV controversial advertising and whether religion and gender differences have an impact on people's perception of controversial advertising or not. The findings of the study revealed that 70 percent of the respondents showed great offensiveness towards male or female underwear, cigarette and condoms. Moreover, while examining the highest correspondingly ranked reasons for being offensive, respondents believe that sexiest images, nudity, western images, anti-social behavior and indecent language are the only reasons presented in the study. This is due to the fact that Pakistanis correlate the use of sexist images, indecent language and nudity to Islamic ethics, which emphasizes that the pervasiveness of Islam affects each aspect of a Muslim's life. The study emphasized the existence of offensive advertising in Pakistan and it showed how religion affects both genders' perception towards these kinds of TV advertisements (Akhter, Abassi, & Umar, 2011).

According to Fereidouni (2008) consequences of controversial advertising may be offensive among receivers of the advertising and such offensiveness lead to negative actions of consumers, such as reductions in purchasing levels of the products advertised, negative word-of-mouth, complaints to advertising regulatory bodies, and even company boycotts. Ammar, Khan, Ahmad and Zafar (2014) conducted a study in four provincial subcultures of Pakistan to examine differences in attitudes towards socially-sensitive advertising the rejection of the brand. The findings revealed that the likelihood of the rejection of the brand increased with an increase in negative perceptions.

Attitude towards the advertising represents a useful effectiveness measure of the advertisement. In other word, positive attitude towards advertising can significantly affect advertisement effectiveness, such as communication effects (Hwang & McMillan, 2002). Mehta (2000) also mentioned that audience is persuaded by advertising if the audience has a positive attitude toward advertising. Chaidaroon and Polyorat (2008) conducted a study on controversial advertising and found that controversial ads do not always lead to negative consequence but the undesirable outcomes are sometimes unavoidable.

Past literature shows that there is a relationship between advertisements and consumer behavior. In several cases, when it is difficult to measure actual behavior, intention is taken as the antecedent of actual consumer behavior which play a role of mediator between advertisements and behavior. Barber and Taylor (2013) also mentioned that behavioral intention is a good estimator of peoples' actual behaviors and TPB is popular in this respect (Sabir et al., 2014).

## Discussion

Heavy investment in advertising developed a need to have close examination of advertising role, functions and its effects (M. Nooh, 2009). Wells, Burnett and Moriarty (2006) said that to create ads that work, advertisers must understand how consumers behave and they must be sensitive to their needs. The implicit goal of advertising is to persuade the consumer to do something, often to purchase a product. To achieve this goal, advertisers must first understand their audience. They must learn about consumers' ways of thinking, the factors that motivate them and the environment in which they live.

Fereidouni (2008) mentioned that one of the issues related to the advertisement is the offensive advertising. Discussions of offensive advertising were found twenty seven years ago, dispersed among topics such as "unmentionables" (Wilson, & West, 1981), "offensive, irritating, or intrusive advertising" (Aaker, & Bruzzone, 1985; Waller, 1999), "sex and decency issues" (Boddewyn, & Kunz, 1991) and "shocking appeals" (Dahl, Frankenberger, & Manchandra, 2003). Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchandra (2003) proposed that "offensive advertising is an act and a process that violates the norm. Offensive advertising includes messages that violate laws and customs, moral or social code".

Waller (2005) defines controversial ads as "advertising that, by the type of product or execution, can elicit reactions of embarrassment, distaste, disgust, offense, or outrage from a segment of the population when presented". Controversial ads, in this sense, can lead to either positive or negative consequences as a result of the extreme emotional response from the receivers. Offensive ads, on the other hand, include only those that result in negative consequences and therefore are subsets of controversial ads (Chaidaroon, & Polyorat, 2008).

Waller et al. (2013) mentioned that previous studies indicate different types of products as controversial when they are advertised like alcohol, underwear, cigarettes, condoms and female contraceptives. Academic scholars called such types of products as: "unmentionables", "socially sensitive products" or "controversial products". Fereidouni (2008) stated that such products which have something against delicacy, decency, morality or they develop distaste, outrage, offense or disgust when presented freely and openly.

Lutz (1985) mentioned that attitude toward the advertising in consumer behavior context has gained great attention. The construction of attitude toward the advertising has an important influence on the advertising communication effectiveness and consumer behavior (Lutz, 1985). Sunde (2014) also described that advertising has potential to influence attitudes and behavioral intentions. Nooh, Shukor, Aziz, Khairi and Abdullah (2014) said studies have shown that advertisement is an important variable in determining consumer behaviors.

Sometimes marketers and advertisers advertise their products in such way that make their products and advertisements controversial because they want to get attention from the audience through controversy, but sometimes controversy leads to negative consequences which may be harmful to organizational reputation (Chaidaroon, & Polyorat, 2008; Waller et al., 2013). According to Fereidouni (2008) consequences of controversial advertising may be offensive among audience and such offensiveness lead to negative actions of consumers, such as reductions in the sale or company/product boycotts.

Previous literature also evident that there is a relation between advertisements and behavior, but there is a lack of empirical study in literature which focused on controversial advertisements and consumer behavior. As Run and Ting (2013) stated that even though a good number of studies have been dedicated to investigating controversial advertising, but there is still an extreme lack of research about controversial advertisements. So, there is a need to conduct an empirical study to determine the influence of controversial advertisements on consumer behavior.

Hadzalic and Akervall (2011); Waller et al. (2013) and Amor et al. (2014) also suggested that scholars should investigate the relationship between controversial & offensive ads and consumer response to such ads. Sunde (2014) suggested that study should be conducted to identify the relationship between attitude toward advertisement and behavioral intention.

## **Conclusion**

One important issue related to advertisements is controversial advertising. It is observed that when the advertisements are perceived controversial by people, such advertisements create negative effects not only on product or brand, but also affect the organizational reputation. Controversial advertisements and advertisements of controversial products are great challenge for marketers and advertisers because of high level of risk involved in this practice. Some advertisers use controversial advertisements intentionally because it's an easy way to get attention of people. It is evident that there is a relationship between advertisements and consumer behavior, but there is still an extreme lack of research articulating relationship between controversial advertisements and behavior. Scholars also suggested that there is a need to consider and investigate what are the nature of consumers in controversial & offensive ads and how do they respond to controversial ads differently.

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