

DETERMINING ATTITUDINAL BELIEFS ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ADVERTISING

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine the beliefs about advertising of two controversial products, namely political parties and sexual diseases prevention. The theory of reasoned action was utilized as underlying premise to elicit beliefs about controversial advertising in order to understand the formation of attitude towards the advertising. A qualitative approach by means of personal interview was adopted to explore the relatively unknown phenomenon. Subsequently, 43 interviews were conducted in Sarawak and the transcripts were then content-analyzed by multiple coders. The findings show that there are 11 statements of belief for the advertising of political parties and 6 statements for the advertising of sexual diseases prevention. Although both types of advertising are primarily considered as a source of information, their descriptions are largely different. While the advertising of political parties is mainly believed to be giving misleading information and for personal interest, the advertising of sexual diseases prevention is regarded as a form of education when executed appropriately. Therefore, the former must be carried out with care to avoid negative responses, and the latter should be done fittingly. This articulates the underlying consideration that there are different beliefs by type of advertising, and about what might create controversy.

Keywords: Controversial Advertising; Belief; Political; Sex Diseases Prevention.

1. INTRODUCTION

Marketers and business practitioners are constantly confronted with intricate tasks of targeting and promoting products to consumers effectively. Consequently, advertising with novel, fresh and even unorthodox ideas and themes is more than often needed, and hence used to generate awareness and interest in the marketplace (Jewler & Drewniany, 2001; Reid, *et al.*, 1998; Wells, *et al.*, 2003). Despite having laws to govern advertising and its activities, various advertising-related matters are left to the discretion of the senders, and are based mostly on ethical considerations (Wells, *et al.*, 2003). As a result, controversial images, slogans and subjects, including products that may potentially be seen as offensive when advertised, are frequently exploited (McIntyre, 2000; Pope, *et al.*, 2004). These have become more common over the last two decades with no sign of abatement (Pope, *et al.*, 2004; Severn, *et al.*, 1990).

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Even though a good number of studies have been dedicated to investigating attitude towards controversial advertising (De Run, *et al.*, 2010; Fam, *et al.*, 2004; Waller, 1999a, 1999b), there is still a dearth of knowledge as to what actually forms such attitude, which in turn predicts intention and behaviour.

Consequently, little is known about the specific descriptions pertaining to the attributes of controversial advertising, and the manner by which attitude towards them, often measured by the level of favorability in past literature, is actually formed. Moreover, despite the advancement of communication technology as seen in Internet and mobile devices, most of the studies focus on the western attitude towards such advertising (Fam, *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, this study aims utilize a qualitative approach to elicit the determinants of attitude towards the most and the least controversial products when they are being advertised and seen. The former is the advertising of political parties while the latter sexual diseases prevention. Using the theory of reasoned action (TRA) as the underlying basis, attitudinal beliefs will be looked into in order to elicit the descriptions that explain views about the product and articulate reasons why one holds certain attitude and intention towards controversial advertising.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Controversial Advertising*

Earlier findings have shown that controversial advertising was found to be predominantly viewed as something negative as it was described as unmentionables, offensive, intrusive and irritating, and socially sensitive (Aaker & Bruzzone, 1985; Bartos, 1981; Fahy, *et al.*, 1995; Li, *et al.*, 2002; Phau & Prendergast, 2001; Rehman & Brooks, 1987; Shao & Hill, 1994; Triff, *et al.*, 1987; Waller, 1999a; Wilson & West, 1981). It is often referred to when the advertising brings out reactions of embarrassment, distaste, disgust or outrage from a group of people when advertised and seen (Waller, 2005). It can easily turn out to be something offensive when it abuses the norm, and induces negative perceptions and reactions from the consumers (Dahl, *et al.*, 2003). Any of such negativity can be detrimental to advertising effectiveness and the product itself.

However, despite being controversial, there appears to be an increase in the amount of such advertising printed and broadcast (Fam & Waller, 2003). It is further intensified by the rapid progression of communication technologies since advertisements can now be seen by people in any part of the world (Waller & Fam, 2000). The rise of controversial advertising is mainly generated by the fact that advertising with fresh ideas and even unexpected elements can be successful in gaining awareness or winning attention and increasing profits in complex societies (Dahl, *et al.*, 2003; McIntyre, 2000; Pope, *et al.*, 2004; Waller, 1999b). As a result, understanding attitude towards controversial advertising becomes a major interest among marketing researchers and practitioners. Therefore it is of utmost importance to delve into the formation of attitude towards advertising so as to understand what makes the advertising controversial and how one differs from another.

Past researchers have studied products that are deemed controversial when advertised, and come out with 17 of them (De Run, *et al.*, 2010; Waller, *et al.*, 2005). These 17 products