

# **EXPLORING ANTECEDENTS OF ATTITUDE TOWARDS CONTROVERSIAL ADVERTISING**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to explore the antecedents to attitude about advertising of two controversial products, namely political parties and sexual diseases prevention. The theory of reasoned action was used to provide theoretical basis to exploring beliefs about advertising and explaining attitude. Accordingly, qualitative approach by means of personal interview was adopted, and all interview transcripts were later content-analyzed by multiple coders. The findings show that there are 11 statements of belief about the advertising of political parties and 6 statements about sexual diseases prevention. Even though the advertising of both products are mainly considered as a source of information, their descriptions are very different. While advertising of political parties is chiefly believed to be misleading and for personal gain, advertising of sexual diseases prevention is regarded as a form of education. Thus the former must be carried out with care to prevent potential negative responses, and the latter should be done without exaggeration to achieve its intent. This reinforces the understanding of attitude towards controversial advertising by its type, and beliefs about advertising which might be different and thus create controversy.

**Keywords:** Controversial advertising, belief, political, sex diseases prevention

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## INTRODUCTION

Marketers and business practitioners are constantly confronted with intricate tasks of targeting and promoting products to different consumers effectively. Advertising with novel, new and even unorthodox ideas and messages is more than often needed, and hence used to capture awareness and interest in the marketplace (Jewler & Drewniany, 2001; Reid, *et al.*, 1998; Wells, *et al.*, 2003). Despite having laws and regulations to govern advertising and its execution, various advertising-related issues are ultimately left to the discretion of the senders (Wells, *et al.*, 2003). As a result, controversial images, slogans and subjects are frequently exploited (McIntyre, 2000; Pope, *et al.*, 2004), and they have become more common over the last two decades (Pope, *et al.*, 2004; Severn, *et al.*, 1990).

Even though a good number of studies have been dedicated to investigating attitude towards controversial advertising, there is still an extreme lack of research articulating the formation of such attitude. Consequently, little is known about the specific descriptions pertaining to the attributes of controversial products, and the manner by which attitude towards them is formed. Measuring attitude from the viewpoint of favorability does not divulge much about consumer response. Therefore, this study aims to explore the attitudinal beliefs about controversial advertising of political parties and sexual diseases prevention. The former is found to be the most controversial advertising, and the latter the least when advertised and seen in Sarawak.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Controversial Advertising*

Interest in attitude towards controversial advertising is mainly generated by the fact that such advertising can be successful in gaining awareness or attention and increasing profits (Dahl, *et al.*, 2003; McIntyre, 2000; Pope, *et al.*, 2004; Waller, 1999b). It is further intensified by the phenomenon that people in any part of the world today have a greater chance of exposure to controversial advertising due to internet and pay television (Waller & Fam, 2000). Despite being controversial, there appears to be an increment in the amount of such advertising printed and shown (Fam & Waller, 2003). Accordingly, academic studies are carried out in different settings with different cultural backgrounds over the years to investigate the matter, and they can be found in literature about “unmentionables”, “offensive, intrusive and irritating advertising”, “socially sensitive products”, “acceptable advertising” and “advertising ethics” (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). Controversial advertising thus can be succinctly described as advertising, either by the type of product or execution, that can bring out reactions of embarrassment, distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage from a group of people when advertised and seen (Waller, 2005). Notwithstanding its usefulness, controversial advertising can turn out to be something offensive when it abuses the norm, and induces negative reactions from the consumers (Dahl, *et al.*, 2003).

Researchers have studied products that are deemed controversial for quite some time. This study adopts 17 products from the past studies (de Run, *et al.*, 2010; Waller, *et al.*, 2005), and they are alcoholic products, charities, cigarettes, condoms, female contraceptives, female hygiene products, female underwear, funeral services, gambling, guns and armaments, male underwear, pharmaceuticals, political parties, racially extremist groups, religious denominations, sexual diseases prevention, and weight loss programs. However, only five controversial products are examined in preliminary stage due to contextual consideration which will be explained in the latter section. These five products are then narrowed down to two, namely political parties and sexual diseases prevention based on their level of controversy for the purpose of this study.

### *Theoretical Consideration*

The theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) is adapted as the underpinning basis to look into belief about controversial advertising. It is posited that an individual’s behavioral intention to perform a behavior is