Bachelor Degree Project: a case study analysis on the factors that influence perception to controversial advertisement

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ABSTRACT

This study provides empirical evidence on how people perceive controversial advertisement and sets up a list of the factors that are able to influence the reactions of people exposed to controversial advertisement. Using theory to determine which factors could influence the reaction, we then tested our hypothesis by conducting a focus group and then confirming our findings with an interview on a larger scale, and trying to determine the factors holding the greatest responsibility for the reaction of someone when exposed to controversial advertisement.

We saw that internal factors such as gender, age and education play the biggest role when looking at how you see the world, and how the world sees you, and therefore can greatly influence how people react to controversial advertisement, but also that external factors like one’s culture was of great importance too, as culture has the power to shape an individual despite its personality and tastes.

Our work paves the way to other sets of studies aimed at discovering how each of the factors play with one another to design one’s personality and reaction to controversial advertisement.

For the chapter 3.1 Criteria for assessment, authors have used their previous work which described the method they were going to use for their bachelor degree project.
1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

The use of controversial advertisement started when companies figured out that common advertisement had less and less effect on sales in this over-competitive environment, which further led to the need of finding new ways of attracting the customer’s attention (Pope, Voges and Brown; 2004). Those authors have shown that the attitude toward the advertisement (Aad) was greater towards controversial advertisement than non-controversial advertisement, but what factors can influence the reaction of someone to controversial advertisement?

Many studies have been done in this field before (Ting & Run, 2012; Kotler & Armstrong, 2011; Sengupta & Dahl, 2007) in fields surrounding the scope of our study, talking about the influence of gender, the influence of generations, age, culture and the influence of social class in consumer behavior and attitude towards controversial advertisement. The studies from Ting & Run (2012) and Sengupta & Dahl (2007) were conducted in asian countries, therefore we think that controversial advertisement perception can be different when done in european countries like our study. Therefore, our study will follow the baselines of the criteria that they observed, while adding some others that we thought would be necessary when conducting our focus group and our theoretical data, to add content to this very interesting topic.

1.2 Problem discussion

During the past few years, the use of controversial and provocative advertisement has increased, and according to Pope, Voges and Brown (2004) this is the result of the increased advertisement competition between the different brands. Pope, Voges and Brown (2004) define the perception or the attitude towards an advertisement as the feeling that appears in our mind when confronted to it, and can severely influence how the customer will feel about this product in the future.

The principal aim of using controversial advertisement is to raise brand awareness and to gain attention through controversial advertisement, but sometimes, using such advertisements can be very damaging for the company, using the example of United colors of Benetton, suffering from their shocking ads. A positive side to it is the fact that such ads are mediatized, and therefore bring light on those companies. (Pope, Voges & Brown, 2004 and Ting & Run, 2012)

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Bryla and Gruczynska (2018) add that companies can no longer run advertisements with little regards to social issues, therefore taking into account the reaction of their customers when confronted to the advertisement is mandatory.

Ting & Run (2012) add that marketing practitioners always have to renew themselves in order to attract attention through advertising in order to yield favorable responses towards products.

Ting & Run (2012) and Kotler & Armstrong (2011) already tried to determine factors influencing attitude towards controversial advertisement (through generational aspects and psychographic variables), but were in our opinion too broad, taking only the generational factor for Ting & Run (2012) and only broad themes for Kotler & Armstrong (2011). We find there is a lack of deeper research in terms of different factors of influence, external or internal, and that’s why we decided to follow the path of studying the factors of influence coming into play when reacting to controversial advertisement. Through our research we wish to fill in this gap and provide informations about what factors can influence the perception towards controversial advertisement.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of our paper is to determine the reaction inhibited by controversial advertisement, by taking into account the multiple factors, either internal or external, that are able to modify this reaction and therefore make each people react to advertising differently.

What factors can greatly influence the reaction to controversial advertisement?

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2.0 Theoretical framework

2.0.1 Foreword

For the theoretical framework, we will first focus on how important the consumer behavior (i.e. attitude/perception) is when considering launching a controversial advertising campaign, while discussing some drawbacks if badly done. Whereas in the second part of our theory we will discuss what factors can influence the perception of controversial advertisement regarding the culture in which the advertisement is launched.

2.1 Consumer behavior and controversial advertisement

Abdul, Norsiah and Sabrina (2016) argue that mass media advertising is a very useful tool to influence consumer behavior on a large scale. In advertising, the important part is the consumer behavior (i.e. attitude, perception), which is how people will react to your product depending on how it will be presented and if their buying intentions will evolve in a positive way when watching the advertisement.

The authors quote a previous study from Zanot (1984) describing the negative attitude toward advertising in 1960s and 1970s, explaining that this bad view reduced over time until now where advertising is a part of our lives. Abdul, Norsiah and Sabrina (2016) add that studying attitude is a very crucial point in order to measure the people’s perception of an advertisement in order to establish a list of what people like or dislike. Every attitude can be explained through many criteria and therefore may vary from person to person.

Waller (1999) and Abdul, Norsiah and Sabrina (2016) argue that marketers should focus on providing positive experiences to people watching the advertisement, because when exposed to offensive, annoying or deceptive, insulting or overly manipulative, people tend to develop negative attitudes and feelings of irritation and perceive the product as unwanted. They add that various factors could be used in order to analyse how people perceived advertisement, using gender, age, religion, level of education, culture etc. (Ting & Run, 2012)

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Abdul, Norsiah & Sabrina (2016) and Fereidouni (2008) found that the consequences among receivers of the controversial advertisement in certain countries (those studied were massively inhabited by muslim people), in case they find it offensive, could be the reduction of the intent to purchase such product, whereas in other countries, like Waller (1999) argues, the reaction could be that of the curiosity, and taking interest in the product and checking it out. This really depends on the moral compass of certain cultures, but we see that advertisement perception is very subjective, and as those studies conclude, controversial advertisement is “a process that violates the norm.” They are intended to transmit a message that “violate laws and customs, moral and social code.”

2.2 Factors influencing the perception of controversial advertisement

Chan, Li, Diehl & Terlutter (2007) and Waller (1999) argue that many other factors can be studied but there is a lack of consistency in between every study, which make it harder to position accurately on this topic, but factors like age, gender, culture, level of education and many other like values or beliefs are thought to influence perception of controversial advertisement. (Ting & Run, 2012)

Ting & Run (2012) also studies factors such as “generational cohort” and the role that this factor could play in the attitude towards controversial advertisement. They define generational cohort as groups of people who are born during the same time period. It is believed that each cohorts go through similar experiences of external events, therefore those experiences are thought to affect their beliefs, attitudes and purchasing behavior in ways that will remain during their lifetime. Ting & Run (2012) argue that this type of segmentation provides a long standing solution to understanding customers.

Ting & Run (2012) add that clear differences between Generation X (born between 1961 and 1980) and Generation Y (born between 1981 and 2000) can be found due to the context of their birth. The authors add that Generation X is very skeptical about their future and very individualistic, whereas Generation Y is very positive due to economical and technological developments. They believe that those differences are able to change the perception of controversial advertisement between those two cohorts. Ting & Run (2012) then conducted a study on those two generations, and found consistent evidence that generation shapes and affects the attitudes towards controversial advertisement. In fact, the Generation X reacted differently to female

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contraceptives, feminine hygiene products and funeral services and found them being more of a controversy compared to Generation Y, which found that alcohol, gambling and condoms to be more controversial.

Kotler & Armstrong (2011) also studied the factors influencing consumer behavior (i.e attitude, perception) in their book “Principles of Marketing”. They explain that consumer behavior is determined by 4 dimensions : Cultural, Social, Psychological and Personal, that could be put under two bigger categories : external and internal factors.

They argue that external factors are determining for consumer behavior, especially regarding culture and subculture. Kotler & Armstrong (2011) say that culture is the most basic cause of a person’s wants and behavior, because people from the same society will behave mostly because of what he learned during his life, the values he caught along the way, and the same goes for what advertisement he will enjoy. Subculture also plays a part in this matter. As the authors say, in each culture lives multiple subcultures with similar life experiences and situations. As for the United States, they give the example of the African American, Hispanic American and Asian American, all behaving differently and having different lifestyles that are a reflection of their own culture.

Advertisement perception is often explained through cultural differences, as a study from Chan, Li, Diehl and Terlutter (2007) shows. They conducted a study with German and Chinese people in order to determine cultural differences among European and asian countries. They chose Germany among other european countries because it is the biggest European trade partner in terms of volume, and assume that through this volume, many German and Asian people have already met and felt the cultural differences between them.

Also, Germany and China are among the five biggest advertising spenders on the planet. Chan, Li, Diehl & Terlutter (2007) go on to argue that lots of things in their culture is gesture-based, and therefore using wrongly those gestures in an advertising campaign can be really received poorly on the consumer’s end. This study found that chinese people had the least acceptance toward offensive advertising, everything due to their culture.

Another study from Moon and Chan (2005) showed that asian people in general often react better to advertisement that put their culture on a pedestal, because only then will they know that their culture is not mocked or disrespected. They also show that Chinese people are more individualistic (reference to Hofstede’s typology of cultural dimensions) while in a social context, and advertising in those countries have to put a lot of emphasis on this point, and take into account their differences in order to produce a successful advertisement.

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Chan, Li, Diehl & Terlutter (2007) continue to point out the differences in perception regarding the culture taking this time the point of view of the western world, where they add that sexism and racial discrimination are two offensive appeals especially now. This echoes to Sengupta and Dahl’s 2007 study in which they try to determine the differences in reaction to sex appeals based on the gender. They explain that women will exhibit a poorer attitude toward ads containing gratuitous sexual images (compared to non sexual). This is not for all women of course, but the underlying majority of them will find themselves reacting worse to this kind of images. Simpson & Gangestad (1991) started this kind of work and found consistent results that women and men exhibited deep differences in how they reacted and how they scored on a sociosexual attitude scale.

They found consistent results with men scoring much higher than women, where those who score higher were much more likely to cheat or to engage in sexual activity much earlier on a relationship. Sengupta & Dahl (2007) also conducted experiments in their articles, made up of 51% men and 49% women, and distributed sexual and non sexual images, where they had to grade those images on a 7-point scale from “not arousing” to “very arousing”. Looking at the results, women had a worse response towards sexual advertisement than men, and this is consistent through their experiment.

Sengupta & Dahl (2007) also raise the question of the political side as well as the values/beliefs and the possible link to a different reaction to controversial pictures. Their experiment opposed women, conservatives and liberal, and discovered that liberal women liked the sexual ads better than the non sexual ads. The authors argue that the findings of experiment 3 can be the starting point of a determining segment in advertisement perception.

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3.0 Method

3.1 Criteria for assessment

Gubrium and Holstein (1997) suggest that ethnomethodology is to be used if the purpose is to examine what the reality really is through dialogues between researcher and respondent. Bryman and Bell (2015) further says that an ethnological method can be done through qualitative interviews but needs to be regulated and assessed by certain criterias. These criteria have their roots in the terms validity and reliability which are mainly used in quantitative purpose. When it comes to qualitative research criteria, Guba and Lincoln (1994) claim that trustworthiness and authenticity should be used (rather than validity and reliability) since these are allowing more than one answer to be the correct one. Guba and Lincoln (1994) further claim that there can be multiple sustainable answers to a reality in a qualitative research compared to a quantitative.

3.1.1 Trustworthiness

Guba and Lincoln (1994) say that for a qualitative research such as an interview the trustworthiness has four sub-criterias and can be compared to the equivalents in a quantitative research but with a twist;

1. Credibility of the research is the equivalent to internal validity. Credibility is therefore an assessment criteria about to what extent the researches have ensured that the result of the observations are in accordance with what the respondents have answered. A way of ensuring this is to let the respondents analyse the result and modify it if something has been misinterpreted by the researchers – this is called respondent validation (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Another way of ensuring credibility is to use other methods than the main one(e.g. if observation is the main method, interview of the observed individuals can be a way of controlling the consensus between these two methods) – this is called triangulation (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

We assessed credibility by recording everything the participants had to say, while also writing down everything, so that we had a total objectivity while coding and analysing our focus group and not misinterpreting anything that has been said.

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2. **Transferability** of the research is the equivalent to external validity. Transferability is therefore an assessment criteria that examines the social reality of the research (Bryman and Bell, 2015). (Guba and Lincoln, 1985, s. 316) says that transferability is to what extent the results “can be achieved even in any other context or situation, or in the same context at another time, is an empirical question”. The to make the degree of transferability easier to evaluate Guba and Lincoln (1985) suggest that detailed descriptions of the cultural and social environment should be presented by the researchers, this will make it easier to decide to what extent the results of a research are possible to transfer to another context.

We assessed **transferability** because we chose people from various backgrounds, various ages as well as various political beliefs, values and previous experiences, and we believe that this is of crucial importance in order to get some truth out of our study, and not try to study only one part of a society with pretty narrow point of view.

3. **Dependability** of the research is comparable to reliability. Dependability is an assessment of to which extent the quality of the chosen research method has been reviewed or “audited” by other colleagues that have the relevant competency in order to evaluate the quality (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

We assessed **dependability** by submitting our work to competent teachers tasked of grading our work as well as a competent board of experts tasked of peer reviewing our work.

4. **Confirmability** of the research is equivalent to objectivity. This sub-criteria is an assessment of to which extent the author of a research has not been “[...intentionally letting his or her own personal values or theoretical orientations influence the implementation and conclusions of the research” (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p. 383).

We assessed **confirmability** by being two in order to work on this project, and coming from two very different background, and constantly evaluating our work so that no bias could creep in, seeing the situation with a global point of view.

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3.1.2 Authenticity

Bryman and Bell (2015) writes about authenticity and mentioned that this criteria has to do with measuring the consequence of the conducted research. This can be measured by five sub-criterias:

1. **Fair picture** of a researched area (e.g. a CEO of a company might give one description of their relation to their supplier, while the supplier could give a different description on their relation)

2. **Ontological authenticity** of a researched area (e.g. if the research has increased the understanding of the participators social situation and environment that they are operating in.

3. **Educational authenticity** of a researched area (e.g. if the participants of the research have increased their insight on how other persons in the environment interpreters things).

4. **Catalytic authenticity** of a researched area (e.g. if the research has “...made it possible for the participants to change their situation?”) (Bryman and Bell 2015, p. 383)

5. **Tactical authenticity** of a researched area (e.g. if the research has led to improved possibilities to take action on the researched area for the participants).

Our research aims at providing a totally objective point of view, we assessed the authenticity of our work by always ensuring that our work was done with that scope, and always asking ourselves the question of how it will impact the people interrogated as well as the consequences of our paper. We think that this paper could be a potential asset to marketing companies designing controversial advertisements, so that they are able to target people depending on the factors we observed.
3.2 Data collection methods

As we can read from Bryman & Bell (2015), qualitative research methods have a higher focus on words and descriptions for the data collection and data analyse, while quantitative research is more based on numbers and quantification of these numbers. Indeed, qualitative research focuses more on how individuals are perceiving and interpreting reality. Based on that, this research method for data collection gives a greater openness to qualitative method since it is about explaining, interpreting and describing the collected data. Within qualitative research, there exist different data collection methods, such as focus groups, group interviews or individual ones. (Bryman & Bell, 2015)

3.2.1 Focus groups

Adams, Raeside and Khan (2014) provide the explanation about focus groups saying that they allow to elicit multiple subjects simultaneously, as well as particularly useful to validate findings. Indeed, we chose to do a focus group in order to collect an accurate feeling about a video from a lot of people at the same time. Our focus group was done a little differently from what is usually done, as each participant gave his own opinion and was able to debate with the other participants.

The focus group strategy is fairly used in qualitative research since it’s giving the researcher different opinions towards a specific subject. A focus group consists of several people that are interviewed at the same time on a narrow subject as opposed to a group interview where several issues are discussed. This method allows the participants to interact with each other, brings different reactions and arguments through the group dynamic that arise from discussions, also, having different people thinking about one specific issue brings creative ideas and solutions to a specific problem. The focus group is generally framed by a moderator who needs to find an equilibrium between being too dominant and letting the debate growing too broad. It is also important to find a good equilibrium in the size of the group so everyone can express their opinions towards the subject. (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

In that case this kind of data collection method would be a very interesting approach since the kind of advertisement itself that will be discussed is based on controversiality. Indeed, a controversial advertisement could seem legit to someone

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and totally outrageous for someone else and from that would arise a discussion where they will both express their opinions towards the selected advertisement.

We are confident from looking at the research done in controversial advertisement before us that the cultural background, previous experiences, occupation, gender and age can have a great impact on the reaction of the people interrogated, therefore we wanted to assess that through the focus group, and then verify our findings with a larger scale study such as the individual interview. In fact, we chose to take different people from different social background in order to get a wide point of view of the society, as they will be affected by different situations in their lives, and thus will provide the experience that we need and the broad spectrum we require for our study.

In order to find people from different backgrounds, we used the stratified sampling method, which allowed us to split people in different groups and therefore place them in the same focus group altogether. We expected to do multiple focus groups until we could find a correlation, but the discussion was so rich and full of content that we could already see correlations between certain factors studied and their reaction.

We chose this video because it framed very well what we imagined from looking at the research, which is controversial advertisement aimed at shocking people and make them remember and even reflect upon what they saw. It allowed us to study more deeply the spectrum of reactions that we expected in order to come up with a good analysis. We chose only one video because this video was already constituted of multiple ones, therefore allowing for a larger panel of advertisement to our disponibility.

3.2.2 Interviews

In the case of an interview, we manage to make sure that there is no bias in our questions, thanks to the use of open questions, that will let the respondent be able to develop as much as they want, while still remaining in our frame of study. Before conducting an interview, Bryman & Bell (2015) are saying that it is important to start with a small introduction of the subject and a description of the purpose of the study. In order to make sure that the respondent had a good comprehension of the subject it also advised to be as clear as possible. (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

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In our case using interviews will allow us to have a significant amount of respondents and therefore confirming the correlations we managed to find in the focus group.

In order to select those 20 people from the interview, we used the stratified sampling method. We classified them in multiple categories regarding their job, studies, age, gender and other factors that we wanted to study, and then while coding the data we would be able to see if the answers to our question would make sense depending on the reactions we obtained. We used an open coding method, by checking for frequency of answers and occurrence.

We chose to show 4 pictures that we selected because they covered a larger spectrum in terms of advertising subject. Those advertisement created a huge backlash against the company that created them, therefore we wanted to maximise the chances of having a reaction from our interviewees, but also because our objective was to analyse what criteria influenced the reaction of our interviewees, so we had to trigger reactions to examine what factors might have influenced this reaction.

We chose to select 20 people for our interviews in order to be the closest from the reality, and also because after finishing those 20 interviews we saw very good links to our research in terms of reactions observed. Therefore, we decided to stop conducting interviews, as we had the data we needed in order to analyse them.

Another goal of ours was to select very controversial advertisement in the country they were first installed. This way we knew the things that offend them the most in advertising and during life experiences in general.

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3.3 Data analysis method

Adams, Raeside and Khan (2014) say that analyzing qualitative data can be quite challenging because the question of “how to reduce the humongous flow of data collected” is a tricky question, because researchers need to keep the whole data in order to prevent biases from creeping in. They say the aim while analysing data is done in seven steps:

- Detect patterns
- Identify deviants and oddities
- Compare to theory - detection of conformance
- Identify groups (classification)
- Compare and contrast groups
- Construct a model
- Test the model (validation)

In order to analyse qualitative data, we used the content analysis method. Adams, Raeside and Khan (2014) define it as analysing key phrases or words and count them in order to analyse the frequency. The content analysis is, as its title entails, to describe the content of the participant’s comments and classify the various meanings expressed in the material we recorded. They add that this method of analysis often lead to a connected narrative, to tell a story in all its details.

The unit of analysis selected is the individual, each participant answering to the interview or the focus group will be important.

The categories we will use will depend on the reaction that were triggered by the advertisement that we showed to our focus group and in our interview.

Bryman and Bell (2015) define the coding of the qualitative data as the most important part given the unstructured nature of those data, whereas quantitative data are ordered by statistical or numeric nature. In order to analyse our data, we used the open coding method, by reading thoroughly the transcript of each interview as well as the focus group, we outlined each concept that was coming back regularly in one’s answer, while creating concepts around those. It allowed us to analyse every question very accurately.

During the focus group, we decided to record the whole conversation as well as writing everything the interviewees were saying. We were three in order to manage to type everything, as well as making us able to animate the debate better.

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3.4 Ethical and social issues

Albaum & Duerr (2016) define ethical issues as what most people view in the society as being moral, good or right. In order to explore ethical issues, we followed the guidelines given by Bryman and Bell (2013) which include: no harm to the participant, no lack of informed consent, no invasion of privacy and no invasion of deception.

In order to ensure that ethical issues were respected, we filled in the needs emitted by the university of Glasgow in accordance to a survey of ethics proposal conducted in the college, as well as our use of Sue Greener’s work about business research methods:

**Procedure**: Before the focus group, we distributed the process we were about to start, explaining the questions we were about to ask, the topic we wanted to discuss, as well as talking about the shocking things that they were about to see in those advertisements. Each member was informed that they could stop the process at any given time.

**Location**: Being close to every member of the group, we took the decision of setting up the focus group in my apartment, decision that was shared to the group, which agreed even when asked if they wanted to go somewhere else. We ensured that the location was neutral for the interviewees.

**Safety**: As a measure of safety for both the interviewer and the interviewees we decided to disclose no personal facts about those people as well as the interviewer. All people were therefore able to speak their minds as will.

**Confidentiality**: Before starting the focus groups, we asked if anyone wanted to be fully anonymous, to which nobody answered, but for pure ethical reasons we decided to hide the names of each participants and only describe them from a moral standpoint, with their ages, politics side and occupation to be able to draw conclusions from those characteristics.

**Permission**: Each participants gave their permission orally and were fully aware that this work might be published on Linnaeus University’s website or online library, and gave their consent to do so.

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We also took into account the fact that we have a responsibility towards society when emitting this paper, and it is of paramount importance to acknowledge it. We are aware, following the paper from the Social Research Association (2003) that in order to maintain high quality research that we have to respect legal and moral order established in our society, as well as remaining impartial at all times. In order to assess those criteria, we decided to follow the guidelines of the Social Research Association (2015) which presented what criteria were to be assessed when presenting a high quality social research.

1. Our study needs to be useful, have some practical relevance. We believe that our study is done so that it benefits individuals, and the society as a whole. The paper takes no hit at anything and only provides facts validated by the scientific community, while respecting the laws and the people.

2. Our study needs to be fit for purpose. The meaning is that our methodological choices should be witnesses of the fact that our research design and approach is fit for purpose. We selected carefully what empirical data were required in order to get the most out of the subject we wanted to explore, as well as looking at previous theory that had been done about the same subject. We also presented findings and conclusions that were supported by the research evidence.

3. Our study needs to be transparent. We made sure, by describing what we had done throughout the method and explaining how we assessed every criteria needed, that each and every people willing to assess it themselves could be done very easily.

4. Our study needs to be useable. This study is available to everyone that is willing to work on this subject and follow it through. We leave all of our findings for other researchers to add to it, and use this purpose to develop it even further.

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### 3.5 Operationalization

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<th>Concept</th>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Interview question</th>
<th>Source</th>
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| Factors affecting controversial advertisement perception | Internal factors | How old are you ?  
What is your gender ?  
What is your level of education ?  
What is your religion ?  
What is your job ?  
Do you hold any political beliefs ? (If yes, which one ?) | Ting & Run (2012)  
Chan, Li, Diehl & Terlutter (2007)  
Sengupta & Dahl (2007) |
| External factors | Where are you from ?  
What was your early life like ?  
Did your parents teach you any values or beliefs that you like to stick to ? | Chan, Li, Diehl & Terlutter (2007)  
Moon & Chan (2005) |
| Advertisement perception | Influence of media | In general, are you influenced by advertisement when taking the decision to buy something ? | Abdul, Norsiah and Sabrina (2016) |
| Advertisement perception | Effect of controversial advertisement | What is your reaction when you are exposed to an advertisement that contradicts your own beliefs ? (controversial advertisement) | Waller (1999)  
Abdul, Norsiah and Sabrina (2016) |
| Advertisement perception |  | *Showing of our selection of controversial advertisement*  
First 4 images : Could you rank those images from the least shocking to the most shocking and explain to us why ? | Waller (1999)  
Abdul, Norsiah and Sabrina (2016) |

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4.0 Empirical framework

4.1 Focus group

Our focus group took place because
Before conducting interviews, we decided to setup a focus group with multiple people of our surroundings in order to validate our hypothesis:
- Our first hypothesis was that internal factors are the driving factors when reacting to a controversial advertisement, putting the emphasis on gender and culture
- Our third and final hypothesis was that controversial advertisement triggered a strong reaction, but rarely positive towards the product.

. We then made a focus group constituted of 8 people, around a table, made out of people chosen carefully, with different background, different activities and different political side, and then oriented the debate toward a specific subject: controversial advertisement.

Our group was constituted of 4 people between 40 and 50 years old, as well as 4 people between 18 to 25 years old. Person n°1 was a male, CEO of his own company, between 40 to 50 years old and on the right side of politics. Person n°2 was a woman, teacher and researcher in sustainable development in a private business school, and being more of in the middle politics wise. Person n°3 and 4 were both employees of person n°1’s company between 40 to 50 years old, with an alt-left vision of politics for person n°3 and an alt-right vision of politics for person n°4, one being of a worker’s union called CGT. Of all 4 people between 18 to 25 years old, all 4 were students, one being on the alt-right side of politics, two on the right side and one on the alt-left. The gender distribution in this focus group was balanced, with 4 women and 4 men. We chose to take such different people in order to illustrate what we can find in the society, with teachers, workers, CEO and students, as well as all kinds of politics opinions, and we are pretty happy with that. (Excerpts of participants in appendix 3)

In order to help us in this focus group, we chose to select the help of a youtube video (whose link will be in the reference list), show them to our audience and then gather their feelings and the things that triggered them or shocked them during those advertisements.

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We then showed the first advertisement of the video to the group (From 0:00 to 0:32). In this one, we notice someone who doesn’t have enough money to buy a pack of cigarettes, so he pulls out a tooth from his mouth in order to pay for it, with the voice over the video saying that cigarettes can cause you to lose your teeth. All were very surprised by the video, thinking that it was maybe a bit violent for an advertisement, but all were very aware of the damage caused by smoking, especially smokers. One told us that the act depicted was very strong, and showing chronic health issues is a strategy very often used by advertising companies when producing anti smoking advertisement.

3 out of 4 males present were not very shocked by this advertisement, while all 4 females were very shocked and found it very violent, joined by the 4th men, they felt very moved by this act, thinking that showing graphic content is probably a good thing in order to disgust people.

The second ad from the video (From 0:33 to 1:02) show a more “cool” side of cigarettes, according to the group, with a sudden stop to reveal an old man in a wheelchair with all sorts of medical assistance, speaking with huge breathing in between sentences. All agreed that cigarette made you look cool especially in middle school and high school. All three smokers started at that time, and that’s the image they had when they started smoking, seeing people smoke in movies, influential people, it can be really hard to resist. Non-smokers argued that there was other ways to be “cool” during those times, without risking your health. A long debate started, but we really felt good about this focus group, there was no clear signs of a leader who would direct the group on one opinion, and neither was there a group effect with everyone saying the same things to be part of a whole, but rather different people, with different views of life but with real arguments about the things they were defending.

We had 6 people saddened by this advertisement, but we found that men were a little bit less moved by this video, and during the whole focus group in general, and after talking to my colleagues, we all agreed that in fact they seemed less emotional than our female participants.

The third advertisement we selected (From 2:40 to 4:10) and the last from this video, is, according to 6 people out of our group of 8, the most shocking one, using children to make a point is what triggers them the most, and what appeals to them the most, given that 50% of our group has one child or more. They all told us that they felt a real anger, even though it was just actors, toward the mother, then the girl, and then the father from the man during the voice over. We think this is also the best advertisement that we have ever encountered from our whole study on this project. The whole group was really moved by this advertisement, and we can see it very clearly in the recordings that we have of their reactions, knowing that somewhere it is probably what is happening, and therefore wanting to make a change.

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Person n°1, after having been questioned, thought that he was a lot more touched by child labor and doing harm to a child in general, given that he has two daughters, but he also told us that this was due to his culture, that child were much more important than adults from where he was from, and that every parent is totally in love with children.

Person n°2 was shocked by every advertisement she encountered during this focus group, even more so by the advertisement number 2, that she classified as being the worst of all.

Person n°3 was pretty silent during the whole focus group. He talked a little when asked about what made him feel offended, saying that he didn’t like people bullying weaker ones, and that he didn’t really identify with any of those advertisement, given that he didn’t have kids and didn’t want to have any in the future.

Person n°4 participated the most, and was outraged by every advertisement, taking every advertisement very seriously, talking about how this is a representation of the reality and that we shouldn’t let this be forgotten.

Person n°5 was the second person that didn’t react to many advertisements, saying that he lacked empathy and seeing all those twisted things happening was not very shocking to him, that he was way more shocked when he saw earlier that year the pictures of animals being tortured in slaughterhouses.

Person n°6 was the most composed of our female participants. She was very shocked by the second advertisement, but not so much by the other two, and gave her honest opinion for every advertisement shown, while expressing a clear point of view about each one.

Person n°7 was the only male to be shocked by every advertisement. Him being a smoker played on the balance because it helped him feel concerned by those ads, as well as having a baby. All of this made him feel saddened by those advertisements, and he reflected greatly on this.

Person n°8 felt mixed after this interview, but in general this experience has made her reflect on some things that she wanted to change for a long time. She told us when we interrogated her about what shocked her the most that seeing child getting harmed troubles her a lot.

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We learned with this focus group that our hypothesis were in the right direction, we found strong correlations with gender and culture and how people reacted, with gender being the biggest driver, we also assume that the age is very important because this adds up to previous experiences, parenthood and seeing different eras of our country might increase the tolerance towards certain things or disgust the other way around.

Even though this is just a focus group, therefore we cannot be certain about those results, we also found that controversial advertisement triggered a strong reaction of disgust towards what we presented, mainly due to the fact that our advertisement emphasized on trying to convince people to stop smoking, and we took this into account. This doubt in our minds drove us to start doing interviews in order to make sure that those findings were relevant.

4.2 Interviews

Apart from the focus group that we have organised, we conducted interviews with people from our surroundings that corresponded to our stratified method of sampling, therefore making us able to select people according to their background, their position in life and so on. We decided to conduct interviews after doing the focus group because it was made so that we start driving in the right direction, and try to confirm our hypothesis from the theoretical data. By doing interviews, we are confident about our hypothesis and can now study it on a larger scale.

Off the 20 people that answered our interview, we classified those people in multiple categories, so that we were able to see if those categories responded similarly to our advertisements.

Our group was constituted of 11 men and 9 women. 5 men and 4 women are currently students in a master degree of business, in their second year out of 3. 2 men and 2 women stopped right after graduating from high school (Baccalauréat in France), without going into the higher education at all. 4 men and 3 women have obtained their master’s degree a long time ago and among those people 2 of them have a PhD, one in medicine and the other in criminal law. (Excerpts of participant in Appendix 4)

For the first few questions regarding their attitude towards advertising in general, we asked them some questions about how they reacted towards advertising, how it could influence them when establishing their buying decision and what feeling would

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appear if they were exposed to an advertisement that was contradicting their own beliefs.

For the most part, (11 out of 20), people are influenced by advertisement, taking into consideration the marketing done around the brand as well as the design of the product.

For the second question, we chose to impose some choices due to the possibility of deviating from the question being too high from our perspective, the choices being: Anger, Curiosity, Ignorance or Surprise. 6 people out of 20 chose Anger, 5 people out of 20 chose Curiosity and the same number of people chose Ignorance, whereas Surprise came in last with 4 out of 20 respondents.

Curiosity was mainly chosen by people with high education, whereas anger was chosen by people with less education and by two students in master’s degree.

People who chose ignorance explained that they didn’t like seeing things that contradict what they think, because they fear that they will change their mind and become bad person. We had full master’s degree student answers for this category.

People who chose surprise were also hesitating with curiosity. To them, seeing something unusual draws them to it, but negative things doesn’t work quite as well on them.

We had therefore 9 people between 20 and 27 years old, and 11 people with more than 30 years old. We chose this configuration because we thought people a little bit older than students could have more experience, and be able to explain that their personal experiences shaped them in a way that they would react differently to our advertisements.

In addition to that, we also found people from different backgrounds, origins, religions and with different experiences of life, in order to cover all of the factors we decided to study.

Among all of our respondents, we observed that 15 out of 20 people were shocked by at least one advertisement. The most selected being the first picture with 53.33% of disgust towards it. We can observe that people are really affected when they see an advertisement that is contrary to their own beliefs, and they feel really hurt when exposed to it because they were not expecting to see this kind of advertisement available everywhere to whomever wanted to see it. The second one is the 4th picture with 26.67% of respondents telling us that this was the most shocking, followed always by the first one or the fourth one. They find this ad about slavery more irritating than shocking, because slavery is of course a sensible topic that needs to be explored very carefully. About the fourth one, it received 20% of our votes in first place. The third one received no vote at all.

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People who voted for the first picture tended to be men for the majority (5 out of 8 voters) all with high education and a comfortable job or good studies followed, with a stable life and hard values that their parents taught them. For the women who voted, they considered themselves as “feminist” and therefore this kind of advertisement was not accepted and should be forbidden.

People who voted for the second picture were very mixed, with a perfect parity achieved. This advertisement was mainly shocking to our respondents with no higher education (3 out of 4 in this category), but also to people with religions. It was related to their values they said, because in their holy books everyone was considered equal and therefore slavery was not to be tolerated.

People who voted for the 4th picture were entirely women. Among them was a doctor in law as well as two others being a master’s degree student and the other one already having a master’s degree and working in finance. They were shocked by the comparison made, one even said “I can’t imagine someone who could choose the mice over the child”. 2 out of 3 people in this category were already mother, and seeing this reminded them of their child.

We were very surprised to see that 5 respondents out of 20 were shocked by no advertisement. Our advertisements were selected in a way that no matter where they came from they could be shocked by at least one ad, so that we could dig further and try to see why this ad in particular is shocking to them, and the factors linked to that, but with those 5 respondents (4 out of 5 were men) we were not able to trigger a reaction. When we asked those people why they were shocked by no advertisement, they answered that they felt no real connection to this ad, they felt like they weren’t the target of any of them, being mainly men, even the most shocking among all (the first picture) didn’t really pushed them against the edge. They also acknowledged that they were not very shocked by anything in general.

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5.0 Analysis

Abdul, Norsiah & Sabrina (2016) argue that mass media advertising is a very useful tool to influence consumer behavior on a large scale. Our study sort of corroborates that, with so much as 55% of our respondents influenced by the marketing of the product, but we don’t think this could be the most useful thing when targeting upper class management and people with master’s degree, because they all have done some research for their studies and therefore are more self-aware and better informed.

Those authors add that studying consumer attitude is a very crucial point in advertisement, and that every attitude can be explained through many criteria. We studied those criteria in our study and were left with rather consistent results. Ting & Run (2012) advised for some criteria to be studied, so we decided to study those criteria and find possible correlations, but studying all those criteria at once and being able to find an implication for each criteria to how people react to controversial advertisement will need a study on a larger scale, however we have been able to find many points where we are almost certain that they play a great role in our reaction to advertisement and controversial ones in general.

Out of all the criteria quoted by Ting & Run (2012) : gender, age, religion, level of education, culture etc. we found that gender is maybe the biggest actor of our difference in reaction. Especially in western countries, the differences while raising a boy or a girl are numerous, as there also are changes in how you protect your child depending on its gender. Sengupta & Dahl (2007) touched upon this subject and already tried to determine if some differences were found between genders and as they did, so did we.
Women tend to react in a much more sensational way to controversial advertisement when compared to men, and this is especially to be observed in the interviews we conducted with all those people, where every women reacted to at least one advertisement, whereas 4 out of 11 men didn’t react to any.

We saw a clear gap between both genders and can assume that this has a link with the difference in education, but also that in the era we live in, with all those rape victims coming out to express themselves, women tend to be less acceptive of sexual aspect of life and be more touchy on this subject.

While studying other factors like the age or the level of education, people tend to try to understand rather than get emotional with time and with higher education studies, which is an encouraging sign and possibly something to be studied even more.

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deeply, but we are confident that the level of education and the age plays a part in the perception of controversial advertisement.

Culture is also something to take into account. Chan, Li, Diehl & Terlutter (2007) argued this point comparing China and Germany and observing that eastern countries are much more picky about advertising due to their very complex and broad culture. We have only been able to study the western part of the study but what we found is also very consistent with the theoretical background. In fact, they argued that sexism and racial discrimination were both very touchy subjects due to the past of western civilization and how they colonized various countries around the world. Fast forward to our study, where we observed that out of the 15 people that reacted to an advertisement, the most selected is an advertisement about sexual misconduct/sexism and the second one is about racial discrimination and slavery.

Regarding the work from Ting & Run (2012), we also see that generational cohort can explain many things when it comes to attitude towards controversial advertisement. Indeed, the authors say that Generation X and Y react very differently to advertisement due to life experiences and external factors surrounding their era. The questionnaire showed differences in the field of sexuality and taboo behaviors, this can be explained by the life experiences and the approach to each part of life. We found in our interviews that younger people were less shocked by the advertisements that we showed them, with 3 people out of 5 not shocked by any picture being between 20 and 27 years old, and with a high proportion of Generation X as we can call them choosing ignorance when exposed to something contrary to their beliefs.

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6.0 Conclusion

We can conclude from this study that the way customers perceive controversial advertisement is greatly affected mostly by internal but also external factors. The world we live in can influence our decision making, because our culture is something that we cherish above everything, and as we give to our culture, the culture give to us. That is why depending on the countries you will go to, people will have a different approach to controversial advertisement. Especially in muslim and asian countries, they have a very strong culture often linked to signs of respect that are very complex for the foreigner to master.

In western civilization, people react to controversial advertisement way better than in other parts of the world, because the majority of its countries do not recognize any religions as being official. Therefore, without a cult or a religion, people tend to develop independently and react differently to controversial advertisement.

A lot of factors come into play when trying to determine the reaction to controversial advertisement : Internal factors such as gender, age or level of education but also external factors like culture, how one was raised and where he is living.

We found that gender plays a big role in how one perceives controversial advertisement, this can be explained by the fact that depending on your gender, the education and the way you will see the world will be drastically different, but we are also confident that the culture, age, level of education and political beliefs play a role and give us a definition of controversy very different from one another.

Each factor plays an important role in how one perceives controversial advertisement. Gender is definitely the most defined one, but we also observed that the culture and the religion were two important factors and modify the way to which we react to controversial advertisement.

6.1 Managerial implications

Our thesis presents some managerial implications, therefore we wanted to express them in order to provide a better experience to manager reading this thesis.

Our findings regarding the factors according to which people react differently to advertisement are of considerable importance to a marketing company wishing to

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target certain people. We would advise to not consider controversial advertisement if one’s aim is to target elderly people or low education people (Master studies and above).
In fact, we have evidence showing that the older the people, the worst their reaction could be to controversial advertisement due to their previous experiences and the possible factors that could shock them accumulated during their lives. Whereas regarding people with lower education, they tend to submit themselves to their feelings when exposed to controversial advertisement and therefore have a bad attitude towards the product related to the advertisement.

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7.0 Discussion

We found in our study many aspects that had been discussed in our theoretical background, but we were pretty disappointed with the lack of depth in those studies, with some experiment done in a very crude manner, and that is why we wanted to see for ourselves what factors could influence the perception of controversial advertisement.

Even though this study could be enhanced with more means and more time, we are confident about our results and find consistent evidence of what the theory discussed, and think that one axis of enhancement could be to take each factor one on one, study it deeply and see what factor has the best impact on people, and rank them on a scale to see which factors have the biggest influence on the reaction to controversial advertisement.

We also think that other factors may be found that can influence the reaction to controversial advertisement, like the previous attitude toward the brand for example, the degree of implication of each customer or the appeal to the brand on a personal level. We decided to leave those factors out of the equation because we didn’t study one brand in particular, therefore we couldn’t take them into consideration.

For the chapter 3.1 Criteria for assessment, authors have used their previous work which described the method they were going to use for their bachelor degree project.
REFERENCE LIST


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Zanot E.J's (1984) article as cited in Abdul, Norsiah & Sabrina's (2016) work

Documents :

University of Glasgow’s Research ethics committee. Ethical issues in interview
https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_237671_en.pdf

SRA’s guidelines for a high quality research

Books :

Sue Greener (2008) *Business Research methods*
http://gent.uab.cat/diego_prior/sites/gent.uab.cat.diego_prior/files/02_e_01_introduction-to-research-methods.pdf

Alan Bryman and Emma Bell (2015) *Business research methods. Oxford University Press*
Available in Linnaeus University's Library

https://books.google.fr/books/about/The_New_Language_of_Qualitative_Method.html?id=Z-DL05yOxSUC&redir_esc=y


Available in Linnaeus University’s Library

Focus group :

Video shown to the audience : Anti smoking commercials
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EmzJrHraayA

For the chapter 3.1 Criteria for assessment, authors have used their previous work which described the method they were going to use for their bachelor degree project.
Source criticism (Appendix 1)

During the process of writing the thesis, the first step was to make sure that the things we were doing were correct regarding the process that we learned. Therefore, we had to implement multiple criterion in order to assess this issue. When that step was done, we had to determine the method we were going to use when collecting the data and when we will be done collecting them, how to analyse it.

Criteria for literature search

To make sure the articles from the journals are interesting to use also for this report, the authors have been looking the year of publication not to be older than year 1990 (a random approximate estimation agreed by the authors due to the research material that we found ) since modern business relationships could, according to the authors of this report, be analysed differently by other authors before 1990. To find relevant material, key words such as: shock appeal, sap appeal, controversial advertisement, provocative advertisement, advertisement perception... have been used in the library search engine OneSearch, as well as using the search engine of our home school ICN Business School. The authors also made sure the articles used are all scientific and not popular scientific, which means that every article has been peer reviewed and assessed as such.

Criteria for scientific articles

The articles in this report have been chosen regarding three important factors, first is “aims and scopes”, second is “editorial board” and third is “instructions to authors”. The objective of aims and scopes is to ensure that the articles used aim at answering the research question, whereas the editorial board are the people that review and grade the articles based on their aims and scopes. Then, instructions to authors designate the guidelines that authors of the journal must follow to write their articles. All three criterias have been assessed quite thoroughly by checking those criterias manually throughout the paper.

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Picture from our interviews (Appendix 4)

Picture number 1:

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