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**Controversial Advertising: Attitudes Towards Ads and Memorability**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to see how people react to shocking advertising by looking at their attitudes and memory recall. The outcomes of the study indicate that shock advertising may not be an effective marketing strategy, at least not for the brands shown in the adverts used for this study. This research underlines the importance of understanding the potential implications of utilizing shock advertising and advises marketers to carefully evaluate the appropriateness of this type of advertising in their campaigns.

*Keywords:* generations, advertising, shocking advertising, memory recall, brands, effectiveness, appropriateness

## **Controversial Advertising: Attitudes Towards Ads and Memorability**

### **History of Advertising**

According to Turner (1980) the first forms of advertising go back thousands of years. The ancient Egyptians first used papyrus to produce sales messages and wall posters. Various commercial statements and political campaigns have been discovered in Pompeii and the Arabian Peninsula ruins. Advertising methods such as writing advertising slogans on stones and buildings are still employed in regions of Africa, Asia, and South America today..

Modern advertising began in the 16th century after the creation of the first newspapers and magazines. The first formal weekly magazine emerged in Venice in the early 16th century, and the notion of weekly magazine production quickly expanded throughout Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands. The first weekly magazine showed up in the 1620s in the United Kingdom, while the first daily newspaper, "The Daily Courant," was published from 1702 until 1735. Newspapers have always included advertising to fund the expenses of printing and circulation. Advances in the way of printing led to the beginning of the creation of flyers and business cards. The earliest form of business card did not look like the one we use today, then ordinary paper containing text without any pictures or illustrations was used. At the end of the 17th century, more durable paper began to be used, which generally contained a person's name and address and instructions on how to get to the location of their point of sale. Also according to Turner (1980) a few more changes throughout history, such as the addition of illustrations, colors, and more durable materials, business cards like those used today all over the world were obtained. Emile de Girardin, the editor of the Paris daily "La presse" at the time, was the first to utilize paid advertising to cut newspaper costs, boost readership, and profits in June 1836. His formula was quickly copied by other newspaper publishers. The first advertisements were mainly intended to promote books and newspapers, which were

becoming more and more affordable due to advances in printing technology. At the same time, misleading advertising began to be used frequently.

New forms of advertising are created alongside the emergence of new technology. Companies may now reach millions of people extremely fast and easily because to the Internet, radio, and television.

### **What is Advertising**

According to Antolović and Haramija (2015) it is difficult to give a comprehensive definition of advertising due to the complex character of the concept, multiple functions and interdependent parameters that are harmonized during the process of planning, creation, implementation and control and measurement of advertising effects. It is very important to emphasize that many authors perceive and define advertising as a discipline differently, depending on their science and the environment in which advertising operates and a number of other criteria (Antolović, Haramija, 2015).

According to Kotler (1994), one of the most famous marketing experts, consultants and professors, advertising is “any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods and services through mass media such as newspapers, magazines, television or radio by an identified sponsor”. According to Dyer (1982) in the simplest terms, the term 'advertising' means 'attracting attention to something' or informing someone about something. It can be advertised, advertised by word of mouth, very informally, and without incurring large costs. But, if the desired reach is greater, it should be advertised through a slightly more familiar way, a public announcement such as an ad in a local newspaper. From what is stated, looking at a narrower perspective according to Antolović and Haramija (2015) "advertising is a paid systematic dissemination of messages with the aim of influencing the recipient."

However, in a broader sense, it is "a paid form of market and social communication that is in line with the interests of the advertiser, the public, and the community, where messages are

systematically and purposefully transmitted through mass media to a targeted audience and the public with the aim of influencing the recipients and, ultimately, building attitudes and changing behaviors in both the market and other areas of human activity" (Antolović, Haramija, 2015). Ads do not only sell products and services, the ad itself is a commodity that can be sold, or as critic Judith Williamson (1978) said, "the most common form in which we encounter commercial photography". According to Ferboković (2015) in a way, ads can be considered as modern art of the industrial world. Ads fill every page of newspapers, every corner of cities, and have become a part of everyone's daily life, making a person exposed to thousands of advertising messages. Advertising promotes, encourages, informs, and tries to penetrate deeply into the human consciousness. It can be identified as a deliberate effort to influence the ultimate outcome of actions in inducing preferences. "In this way, advertising activity always represents a kind of manipulated communication, pre-designed and never spontaneous or accidental, with a clearly defined purpose and with the aim of exerting influence in accordance with the interests of the sender, i.e. the creator of the message" (Ferboković, 2015.).

### **Controversial Advertising**

Controversial or shock advertising is a type of advertising that intentionally, not unintentionally, scares and offends its audience by violating social values and personal ideals (Dahl, et al., 2003). It involves "playing" with public policy, goods, or services through "graphic images and blunt slogans to highlight" (BBC News, 2000) certain issues in advertising or public relations. Controversial advertising is intended to cut through the "clutter" of information and advertising in order to attract attention and create a "buzz," and to draw attention to a specific brand or raise awareness about a specific public service issue, health issue, or cause (for example, encouraging drivers to wear seat belts, promoting the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, and raising awareness about racism and other

injustices) (Waller, 2008). Marketers can employ one of seven different forms of shock appeals to shock their target audience (Dahl et al., 2003).

- **Disgusting images** references to death, decay, disease, parasites, bodily injury (such as dismemberment), blood, body parts, orifices, particularly urinary or fecal, gases, or smells
- **Sexual references** references to suggested sexual behavior, partial nudity, or masturbating
- **Profanity/obscenity** swearing, vulgar behavior, and racist epithets
- **Vulgarity** references to offensive behavior by people or animals, such as picking at their noses, farting, licking, or drinking from the toilet
- **Impropriety** violations of societal norms relating to behavior, politeness, etc.
- **Moral offensiveness** using gratuitous force or sex, killing innocent people or animals, making allusions to people or things that promote violence (such as Hitler), and breaking moral norms. (such as shooting someone in the back), exposing kids to situations that could be seen as sexual or violent, and victimizing others are all examples of unacceptable behavior
- **Religious taboos** improper use of rituals or symbols from a religion or a spiritual tradition

### **Attitudes Towards Controversial Ads**

According to Machová, Huszárík, and Tóth (2017) the study examines the effects of shock advertising on the Millennial, Baby Boomer, and Generation X generations. According to the study, shock advertising can be successful in grabbing the attention of all generations, but how each generation responds to such ads varies. Baby Boomers typically have a more unfavorable view toward shock advertising, whereas Millennials are more open to and even

accept such advertising. The study also discovered that gender can affect how consumers react to shock advertising, with women typically viewing such ads more negatively than males. According to the study, when utilizing shock advertising, marketers should take these generational and gender disparities in their target audience into account.

### **Memory recall**

According to Heath and Nairn (2005), the capacity of the audience to recall advertisements is frequently used to assess the success of communication and advertising. Bagozzi and Silk (2001) define recall as the mental duplication of a previously seen or experienced target item or advertising. In order for advertising to be effective, consumers must be able to recall both the brand and the message being promoted (Bushman & Phillips, 2001). Memory is important in shaping customer response to advertising, including whether or not they will purchase the promoted goods (Bushman & Bonacci, 2002). Consumers may become enraged if an advertising breaches cultural standards. Anger can impair memory for three reasons, according to Bushman and Phillips (2001): negative moods interfere with information encoding, mental rehearsal of the advertisement may be disrupted due to aggressive thoughts, and angry consumers may attempt to remedy their bad mood, detracting from their ability to remember the advertisement. While customers are bombarded with commercials on a daily basis, they cannot remember them all, and they may forget an advertisement due to encoding or retrieval failure. The ease with which information may be recovered from memory is determined by the significance of the information to the consumer (Kahneman, 1973). According to Hunt and Ellis (1999), information retrieval failure may result if it is not reinforced or makes a lasting impression on consumers. The importance of the information to the consumer determines how easily it can be retrieved from memory (Kahneman, 1973). According to Hunt and Ellis (1999), information retrieval failure may result if it is not reinforced or makes a lasting impression on consumers. Television advertisements with



violent content are less memorable than those without violent content, and sexual advertisements have lower brand recall than neutral advertisements, especially among women and those who are uncomfortable with sex (Alden & Crowley, 1995; De Pelsmacker & Geuens, 1996; Jones, Stanaland, & Gelb, 1998; Söderlund & Dahlén, 2010; Bushman, 2007).

### **Generational Cohorts Baby Boomers, X, Y, Z**

According to McCrindle (2014) generations have had very different life experiences, particularly in the latter half of the 20th century. While Ys are frequently single-parent children raised by two working parents, boomers were typically raised in large traditional families where the father served as the sole provider. These details make it clear how different the two generations' early years were from one another. But there are additional elements that we associate with generational differences, including music, fashion, politics, and gender relations, all of which developed and underwent significant turning points at various intervals. A generation is traditionally thought of as the "average time interval between the birth of parents and the birth of their offspring." According to this biological concept, generations typically last between 20 and 25 years. Although this definition has been useful to sociologists in the past, it is no longer applicable. Two decades are too broad of a generational range since groups change so quickly in reaction to new technology, professions, and education, as well as shifting social ideals. Thus, generations are no longer defined biologically but rather sociologically. A generation is a group of people that share a similar age and life stage and were born within a similar time frame (no more than 15 years), molded by a certain time period, such as events and trends.

### **Baby Boomers**

Additionally, in keeping with McCrindle (2014) boomers are distinguished by the fact that they were born following World War II. An event's impact on culture has rarely been so great throughout history. The years that followed the war were the exact opposite of the years that

preceded it, with economic growth and full employment replacing the depression and wars. Austerity was replaced by technological advancement and expanding freedoms. However, it was the enormous baby boom that followed the war and the immigration policy that really distinguished them and gave them significance. A generation was essentially born as a result of the population growth. Between 1946 and 1964, the population of Baby Boomers was doubled. The term "baby boomers" refers to those who were born between 1946 and 1964. The Baby Boomer generation officially came to an end in 1964, when the fertility rate began to gradually decline after reaching a peak in 1961 and a small decrease after 1965.

### **Generation X**

Also, according to McCrindle (2014) those born between 1965 and 1979 are categorically referred to as members of Generation X. After the Baby Boomers, the number of births started to rise in 1965. It peaked in the early 1970s before falling again to a low level in 1979. The year with the highest population growth was 1972, when a record-high birth rate was reached and persisted for more than three decades. They kept the name Generation X, which they had previously been known as the Baby Busters generation.

### **Generation Y**

Millennials, often known as Generation Y, are those born between 1980 and 1994. The number of births began to gradually rise once more in 1980, peaking in 1992. The number of births then decreased throughout the remaining 1990s, reaching an all-time low. There have been numerous attempts to rename Generation Y, from the popular "Millennials" to the "Dot.com Generation," but as the alphabetical motif in naming generations endures, Generation Y is the nickname that has gained general approval (McCrindle, 2014).

### **Generation Z**

In 1995, when birth rates rose, Generation Z officially began. Birth rates serve as a solid foundation for generational definitions, coupled with social developments and trends. In

response to dwindling birth rates, governments around the world provide incentives to encourage couples to have children. Governmental incentives of this type haven't been given out since the immediate aftermath of World War II. 2009 marked the end of Generation Z according to the new definition of a generational span (of 15 years), and 2010 marked the start of the following generation, Generation Alpha (McCrindle, 2014).

### **Materials and Procedure**

The purpose of this research was to investigate how people react to shocking advertisements by examining their attitudes and memory recall towards the ads. The research was designed as a recreation of a previous study conducted by Brandon Urwin (2014).

In the first part of the questionnaire there were 5 ads, on which the participants had to rate the ads on a 7-point Likert scale on which each ad used scales of attitudes developed by Voss, Spangenberg & Grohmann (2003).

The second part of the questionnaire was memory recall, in which every participant had to state which ad was the most memorable one to them. The last part of the questionnaire included questions such as age, gender, how the individual identified themselves, and religious affiliation.

The ad seen in Figure 1 (*Advertisement 1: Tampan*), falls into the category of "impropriety" since it defies social standards, according to Dahl, Frankenberger, and Manchanda (2003). Menstruation is traditionally seen as a private problem for women, and this advertising seems to lighten the subject by depicting a woman with a wide smile on her face and emphasizing the usage of blood. The ad's underlying message is that using this specific kind of tampon would assist to avoid such awkward situations.

The ad shown in Figure 2 (*Advertisement 2: Nkosi Children Home*) shows the use of 'Moral Offensiveness' (Dahl et al., 2003) by depicting children suckling from a pig and the tagline 'If you don't feed them, who will?' This advertisement creates an uncomfortable environment for

the spectator and employs inappropriate conduct, since newborns feed from their mothers rather than farm animals. The purpose of this advertisement is to communicate the notion that if parents or a Children's Home are unable to provide for newborns, they may be forced to seek alternate sources of nourishment and comfort.

The ad in Figure 3 (*Advertisement 3: Prestige*) shows the category of 'Sexual References' (Dahl et al., 2003). It shows a lady sleeping on the floor of a vehicle wearing only her panties, with a man dressed in Prestige attire holding a tie around her neck. The advertisement implies that the male has sexual power or authority over the lady, and it might even be construed as a depiction of sexual assault or abuse directed at the woman. Prestige is a fake men's suiting company.

The ad showed in Figure 4 (*Advertisement 4: Saber*) uses the 'Disgusting Images' method (Dahl et al., 2003), since it contains disturbing imagery such as blood, bodily injury, and death. The advertisement depicts a guy being fatally slashed by Saber knives, emphasizing their sharpness and efficiency. It is worth mentioning that this sort of imagery is not usually used in knife advertising, which normally show blades being used to cut food, wood, or metal to illustrate their durability and sharpness.

The final advertisement in Figure 5 (*Advertisement 5: Avantgarde*) uses 'Religious Taboos,' which refers to the incorrect usage of religious or spiritual figures (Dahl et al., 2003). This clothing advertisement has a picture of the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church kissing the Sheikh of the Al-Azhar Mosque, which is regarded unacceptable for two reasons. For starters, it depicts two men participating in a homosexual act, which is frowned upon by many religions. Second, it shows two people from opposite religions kissing each other as if they are close friends or lovers.

## Participants

The questionnaire was distributed via private messages as well as by email. There were 105 participants. The questionnaire was completed by 35.2% (37) men, 60.0% (63) by women, and 4.8% (5) of the respondents identify as non-binary. The average age of respondents was 29.67, with the youngest participant being 18 and the oldest 83.

## Results

In terms of scales of attitude, *Advertisement 1* was mostly considered to be terrible ( $M=5.15$ ,  $SD=2.24$ ) and irritating ( $M=5.00$ ,  $SD=2.27$ ). The least it was considered to be enjoyable ( $M=2.06$ ,  $SD=1.76$ ) and delightful ( $M=2.08$ ,  $SD=1.84$ ). *Advertisement 2* was mostly considered to be terrible ( $M=5.00$ ,  $SD=2.27$ ) and irritating ( $M=4.86$ ,  $SD=2.23$ ). The least it was considered enjoyable ( $M=1.84$ ,  $SD=1.64$ ) and fun ( $M=1.86$ ,  $SD=1.67$ ). *Advertisement 3* was mostly considered ridiculous ( $M=5.36$ ,  $SD=2.01$ ) and terrible ( $M=5.35$ ,  $SD=2.03$ ). The least it was considered practical ( $M=1.82$ ,  $SD=1.52$ ) and informative ( $M=1.82$ ,  $SD=1.56$ ). *Advertisement 4* was mostly considered stupid ( $M=5.34$ ,  $SD=1.97$ ) and ridiculous ( $M=5.30$ ,  $SD=2.03$ ). The least it was considered important ( $M=1.71$ ,  $SD=1.44$ ) and meaningful to them ( $M=1.76$ ,  $SD=1.53$ ). *Advertisement 5* was considered ridiculous ( $M=5.25$ ,  $SD=2.12$ ) and stupid ( $M=5.21$ ,  $SD=2.10$ ). The least it was considered delightful ( $M=1.97$ ,  $SD=1.80$ ) and helpful ( $M=1.98$ ,  $SD=1.69$ ).

According to the survey findings, *Advertisement 5* was the most memorable, with 21.9% of participants naming it as such. When asked why they remembered the advertisement, 34.8% said it was disrespectful and insensitive. *Advertisement 2* was evaluated highly in terms of memorability by 20.0% of participants, with 57.1% of those individuals characterizing it as disturbing and brutal. Meanwhile, 19.0% of participants selected *Advertisement 4* as the most memorable, with 40.0% rating it as disturbing and brutal. *Advertisement 1*, which was rated as the most memorable by 17.2% of participants, was remembered by 27.8% of those

participants for no apparent reason. *Advertisement 3*, which was picked as the most memorable by just 6.7% of participants, was also described as disturbing and brutal by 28.6% of those participants. Interestingly, 15.2% of participants stated that all of the ads were memorable, with 93.8% of those participants describing them all as terrible.

The survey includes a question regarding religious affiliation to better understand the participants' views and perspectives. Of the 105 participants, 78,1% identified as Christian, 7,6% identified as atheist, 4,8% identified as Muslim, 4,8% identified as agnostic, 3,8% of participants classified as 'Other' or opted not to respond, and 1,0% identified as Hindu.

### **Discussion of results**

The purpose of this study was to see how people perceive and respond to shock advertising, and if there are any noticeable differences in views or behaviors between age groups.

According to the findings, participants in the survey had an unfavorable view toward shock advertising. The study's findings indicated that advertisement 5 was the most memorable advertisement among participants, with 21.9% naming it as such. However, 34.8% of those who recalled it thought it was disrespectful and insensitive. This research shows that, while shock advertising is memorable, it does not always have a positive impact on the audience. In terms of age differences, the study's findings differed with prior research (Machová, Huszárík, & Tóth, 2017), which revealed that Baby Boomers often have a more negative attitude toward shock advertising, whilst Millennials are more receptive to, and even welcome, such advertising. However, in this study, all participants showed a negative opinion toward the advertisements, indicating that the previous research's conclusions may not apply in this case. Overall, the study's findings show that shock advertising may not be a successful marketing approach, at least not for the items or brands represented in the advertisements used for this study. Furthermore, the findings contradict earlier study demonstrating that Millennials are more open to shock advertising, since all generations showed an adverse view

toward it. Marketers should examine the possible negative impact of such advertising on their target audience, especially in view of the rising emphasis on ethical marketing practices and consumer activism. Future study should investigate the causes for these unfavorable sentiments toward shock advertising and discover more effective advertising tactics that appeal with different age and gender groups. In terms of memory recall in the research by Urwin (2014) the participants selected the sexual advertisement as the least successful of the five advertisements. However, in my own study, participants selected the advertisement involving religious taboos as the least successful. These varied findings underscore the subjective nature of shock advertising effectiveness and emphasize the need of considering diverse cultural, societal, and individual viewpoints. The differences in perception highlight the need for more research into the factors determining the effectiveness of various forms of shock and the possible impact of cultural context on viewer responses. Understanding these details can help marketers customize their shock advertising techniques to better resonate with their target population.

### **Limitations**

There are a few limitations to this study that should be mentioned. First, the sample size was limited and may not be representative of the wider population as a whole. Furthermore, the sample was not age diverse, with the majority of participants coming from Generation Z and a tiny fraction from Baby Boomers. This restricts the findings' generalizability to other age groups. The study only looked at shock advertising without comparing it to other forms of advertising. As a result, it's difficult to say how these outcomes relate to other types of advertising, such as educational or emotive appeals. A potential topic to study may be to investigate how diverse cultural backgrounds and values influence individuals' views and reactions to shock advertising.

## **Study Implications**

The study's findings have important consequences for advertisers and marketers that use shock advertising as a marketing technique. According to the findings, shock advertising may not be as beneficial as previously thought, as it might lead to unfavorable customer attitudes and emotions, potentially causing brand image and reputation damage. Future studies have to consider about using a bigger sample size to improve the generalizability of the results and present a more thorough knowledge of how shock advertising affects consumer behavior. Marketers may need to rethink their advertising strategy and focus on more positive and uplifting content as a result. This might imply a move toward employing educational or emotional appeals to promote more favorable sentiments toward the brand.

## **Final Remarks**

Finally, the purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of shock advertising on consumer attitudes and memorability. The findings show that, while shock advertising may initially capture attention, it can also elicit negative emotions such as disgust and avoidance. This study emphasizes the necessity of recognizing the potential consequences of using shock advertising and suggests that marketers carefully assess the appropriateness of this sort of advertising in their campaigns. Furthermore, it is critical to remember that various generations may have varied views regarding shock advertising, and further study is needed to completely grasp these variances. Overall, this study gives useful insights into the impact of shock advertising and serves as a framework for future research in this field.



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Figure 1 (*Advertisement 1: Tampan*)



Figure 2 (*Advertisement 2: Nkosi Children Home*)



Figure 3 (*Advertisement 3: Prestige*)



Figure 4 (*Advertisement 4: Saber*)



Figure 5 (*Advertisement 5: Avantgarde*)