

CONSUMER OFFENSE TOWARDS THE ADVERTISING OF SOME GENDER-RELATED PRODUCTS

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ABSTRACT

Causing people to take offense can occur when a marketer undertakes a controversial advertising campaign. What can make this a particularly important issue is when companies make what for many individuals is a controversial product, like condoms, erectile dysfunction drugs, feminine hygiene products and certain kinds of underwear. Such companies manufacture legitimate products for their target customers, and they need to be able to communicate an effective message to their customers without causing offense that can lead to dissatisfaction, negative publicity, the rejection of the message, boycotts, other forms of complaining behavior, or other unpleasant outcomes.

This article presents the results of a survey of 265 university students to examine whether they perceive particular gender-related products as offensive, what execution techniques, if any, lead them to find advertisements offensive, in general, and to calculate correlations to find out any potential association between specific gender-related products and specific offensive advertising execution techniques. The inquiry uncovered a number of execution techniques that were perceived as offensive and there were several statistical differences in comparisons between gender and age.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a number of well-known manufacturer/marketers, such as Benetton and Calvin Klein, have undertaken controversial advertising campaigns that have

been very successful; however, not all have proven to be effective. Indeed, some campaigns have backfired and have been damaging to the company and its brand image (Curtis 2002; Irvine 2000; Pope, Voges and Brown 2004).

A major reason for the intentional use of controversial themes and images is that they have the potential to creatively “cut through the clutter” to gain attention and brand awareness (Waller 1999). This has been a successful strategy for companies like French Connection UK, Wonderbra, Love Kylie, among others, and has gained a large amount of publicity with amazingly inexpensive albeit controversial campaigns; the same can be said for some non-profit organizations with public service announcements against smoking, use of illicit drugs, and drunk driving (Severn, Belch and Belch 1990; Waller 1999; Crosier and Erdogan 2001; Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchanda 2003; Miller 2003).

For marketers, the problem can be that a controversial advertising campaign can be very successful or very damaging, depending upon what ultimately happens in the marketplace. For example, the clothing company Benetton has long been criticized for its advertising which uses controversial images to deliver a message of “social concern” (Evans and Sumandeep 1993; Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchanda 2003; Chan et al. 2007), until the “death-row” campaign was felt to have gone too far (Curtis 2002). Similar problems were experienced by Calvin Klein, which had been criticized for running campaigns with explicit sexual images and had to publicly apologize after the outrage caused by a campaign that was alleged to have used images of child pornography (Anon 1995; Irvine 2000).

The result of a controversial advertising campaign can, therefore, be embarrassing, distasteful or even offensive to some part of the viewing audience. This dissatisfaction can lead to a number of consumer initiated actions, such as negative word-of-mouth, complaints to company hot-lines, complaints to advertising regulatory bodies, cutbacks/reductions in customary purchase levels of the products/brands advertised, product and even company boycotts (Crosier and Erdogan 2001; Waller 2005).

Marketers wanting to undertake a controversial campaign often tread a fine line between successfully communicating to the target market and seriously offending some individuals...members and non-members of the targeted group(s). Interestingly, even though some people can be offended by certain advertising campaigns, advertisers are apparently not shying away from but rather are using controversy in increasing numbers. In fact, it has been claimed that the use of provocative or controversial images in advertising has become increasingly common over the last twenty years (Severn, Belch and Belch 1990; Pope, Voges and Brown 2004). The issue for some advertisers, and especially for those with controversial products (for example, condoms, erectile dysfunction drugs, and feminine hygiene products), is to determine who may tend to be offended by their controversial campaign and the reasons for its being perceived as offensive. Some believe that marketers have a social responsibility not to intentionally offend people with their advertising themes and images, yet others believe that in a free market society, companies that market legal products should be able to communicate any type of message to their target customers...as long as no laws are being broken.

It is against this backdrop that this article presents the results of a survey on the advertising of controversial products directed

toward university students and endeavors to discover some of the potential underlying reasons for such students taking offense. More specifically, the objectives of this research are to:

- (1) determine whether those students polled perceive the advertising of particular gender-related products as offensive, and if there is a difference based on gender and age;
- (2) determine the creative advertising execution techniques that are perceived to be offensive by university students, and if there is a difference based on gender and age; and
- (3) calculate correlations to find out any potential association between offensiveness perceptions of specific gender-related products and potentially offensive execution techniques.

BACKGROUND

Definitions

Some marketers, by the nature of their product(s), may be perceived as controversial and any type of promotion may generate negative responses, as might be expected, for example, in the case of cigarettes, alcohol, condoms, erectile dysfunction drugs or feminine hygiene products (Schuster and Powell 1987; Wilson and West 1995; Waller 1999). Studies examining issues related to this area have described such products in a number of ways, including: "unmentionables" (Wilson

and West 1981; Alter 1982; Katsanis 1994; Wilson and West 1995; Spain 1997; Norrie 2005), “indecent products” (Shao 1993), “socially sensitive products” (Shao and Hill 1994a; Shao and Hill 1994b; Fahy, Smart, Pride and Ferrell 1995), “controversial products” (Rehman and Brooks 1987; Waller, Fam and Erdogan 2005), and “offensive products” (Prendergast, Ho and Phau 2002; Prendergast and Hwa 2003).

Wilson and West (1981, p. 92) define “unmentionables” as: “... products, services, or concepts that for reasons of delicacy, decency, morality, or even fear tend to elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage when mentioned or when openly presented”. This definition has since been supported by Triff, Benningfield and Murphy (1987), Fahy, Smart, Pride and Ferrell (1995), Waller (1999), Prendergast, Ho and Phau (2002) and Prendergast and Hwa (2003). Barnes and Dotson (1990) further discussed offensive advertising and identified two different dimensions: offensive products and offensive execution. Katsanis (1994) also added that “unmentionables” were “offensive, embarrassing, harmful, socially unacceptable or controversial to some significant segment of the population”. *Therefore, controversial advertising is herein defined as: advertising that, either by type of product or execution, can elicit reactions of embarrassment, distaste, disgust, offense or outrage from one or more segments of the population.*

Theoretical Issues

While products like alcohol, condoms and feminine hygiene products are both legal and widely available, it may seem unusual that they could be perceived as controversial or even “unmentionable.” The theoretical basis for understanding the potential offense caused by certain advertisements is grounded in an individual’s morality and ethical judgment. In other words, the messages and themes

conveyed in such product/service advertising must be weighed in the context of an individual’s (or society’s) moral philosophy or ethical decision-making framework (Arthur and Quester 2003; Dean 2005), and if advertising messages are contrary to her or his beliefs, then s/he will be offended.

Ethical judgment of advertising can be grouped based on the following theories:

(1) idealism (or deontology) says actions are judged on the rightness or wrongness of the action itself; (2) pragmatism (teleology) says that an act is right if it results in the greatest good for all those affected; or (3) relativism says that no universal ethical rules exist, as decisions are a function of time, place, culture, etc. (Arthur and Quester 2003; Dean 2005). Yet, these are not mutually exclusive, as, when judging the ethical value of a potentially controversial advertisement an individual may take a number of elements from these philosophies into account, plus the influence of socio-demographic elements, like gender, age, culture and religion (Fam and Waller 2003; Fam, Waller and Erdogan 2004).

While from an individual’s perspective, ethical judgment and moral philosophy is important for deciding whether her/his perception of an advertisement is offensive, from an organization’s perspective, it would have to consider its stakeholders when planning to run a controversial campaign. In stakeholder theory, it is important for an organization to relate favorably with the community members, or stakeholders, with whom it does business (Freeman 1984). As part of the overall exchange relationship, a business should also be socially responsible in its business dealings, like eliminating or minimizing any harmful effects on society and maximizing its long-term effect on the community in which it does business (Waller 1999; Mohr, Webb and Harris, 2001; Dean 2004). Therefore, the need to maintain favorable relationships with the various stakeholder groups, such as

shareholders, general public, suppliers, employees and customers, is essential, since they form an integral component of the business loop (Murphy et al. 2005). A potentially offensive campaign may not only reflect poorly on the company, but also embarrass or offend important stakeholders.

Controversial Advertising

Barnes and Dotson (1990) discussed offensive television advertising and identified two different dimensions: offensive products and offensive execution. A number of studies have reinforced this idea, but most of these have concentrated on attitudes towards the advertising of potentially offensive or controversial products (Waller 1999; Prendergast, Ho and Phau 2002; Waller 2005). While it is important for marketers of controversial products to understand their potential to offend and determine possible ways of minimizing this, it has been noted in previous studies that often people are more offended by particular creative execution techniques than the advertising of certain controversial products (Waller 1999; Waller, Fam and Erdogan 2005).

Various types of products, both goods and services, have been suggested by past studies as being controversial when advertised, including cigarettes, alcohol, contraceptives, underwear and feminine hygiene products. Wilson and West (1981), in their study of "unmentionables," included "products" such as personal hygiene and birth control. Feminine hygiene products were the main focus for Rehman and Brooks (1987), but they also included undergarments, alcohol, pregnancy tests, contraceptives, medications, and VD services, as examples of controversial products. When asked about the acceptability of various products being advertised on television, only two products were seen as unacceptable by a sample of college students: contraceptives for men and contraceptives for women. Feminine

hygiene products have also been mentioned in industry articles as having advertisements that are in "poor taste", "irritating" and "most hated" (Alter 1982; Aaker and Bruzzone 1985; Hume 1988; Rickard 1994).

Shao (1993) and Shao and Hill (1994a) analyzed advertising agency attitudes regarding various issues that can be controversial for the agency that handles the account. The products/services discussed in these studies were cigarettes, alcohol, condoms, feminine hygiene products, female undergarments, male undergarments, sexual diseases (e.g., STDs, AIDS), and pharmaceutical goods. Fahy, Smart, Pride and Ferrell (1995) grouped products into three main categories: alcoholic beverages, products directed at children, and health/sex-related products, while Barnes and Dotson's (1990) study included a number of gender-related products, such as condoms, female hygiene products, female undergarments, and male undergarments. Phau and Prendergast (2001) found that products like cigarettes, alcohol, condoms, female contraceptives and feminine hygiene products were perceived as controversial products that could offend when being advertised, and included measurements in their study of sexual connotations, subject too personal, evoking unnecessary fear, cultural sensitivity, indecent language, sexist images and nudity.

Waller (1999) presented a list of 15 controversial products that aimed to range from extremely offensive to not very offensive: Alcohol, Cigarettes, Condoms, Female Contraceptives, Feminine Hygiene Products, Female Underwear, Funeral Services, Gambling, Male Underwear, Pharmaceuticals, Political Parties, Racially Extremist Groups, Religious Denominations, Sexual Diseases (AIDS, STD Prevention), and Weight Loss Programs. He also included six potential reasons for taking offense: Indecent Language, Nudity, Sexist, Racist, Subject Too Personal and Anti-social Behavior. Fam, Waller and Erdogan (2004), replicating Waller (1999)

across four countries, used factor analysis to uncover four groups of controversial product categories: Gender/Sex Related Products (e.g., condoms, female contraceptives, male/female underwear, and feminine hygiene products); Social/Political Groups (e.g., political parties, religious denominations, funeral services, racially extreme groups, and guns and armaments); Addictive Products (e.g., alcohol, cigarettes, and gambling); and Health and Care Products (e.g., charities, sexual diseases (AIDS, STD prevention), and weight loss programs).

As mentioned above, the creative execution used in an advertisement, even for a product that is not controversial by nature, can make the advertisement controversial (Barnes and Dotson 1990). For example, complaints against a Windsor Smith shoes billboard was upheld by the ASB for a sexual image that was not considered decent for the general public (ASB 2000; Creer 2000). Normally an advertisement for shoes would not be perceived as controversial, but the execution, in which a woman trying on shoes was sitting in an overtly sexual pose, makes it a controversial advertisement. Some execution techniques perceived as potentially offensive include: Anti-Social Behavior, Indecent Language, Nudity, Racist, Sexist, and Subject Too Personal (Waller, Fam and Erdogan 2005).

Who Is Offended?

Fahy, Smart, Pride and Ferrell (1995) compared the attitudes of people according to sex, age, income, region, education and race, and found that women, particularly aged 50 and over, had much higher disapproval levels for such controversial commercials. Waller (1999) also compared gender and found females were significantly more offended than males, and were offended by the execution rather than the so-called controversial products themselves.

Also, studies have shown that younger people have a greater acceptance of offensive advertising (Barnes and Dotson, 1990, Grazer and Keesling 1995, Waller 1999), with the predictable result of advertisers more often using sexual or violent images to attract younger people (Bushman and Bonacci, 2002; Reichert 2003). Further, it is claimed that there is a congruity issue with controversial images. As an example, if the advertised product is sexual in nature or used for sexual attraction, the controversial advertisement is deemed as less offensive and is more effective when a sexual theme/executional strategy is implemented (Boddewyn and Kunz, 1991; Grazer and Keesling, 1995; Pope, Voges and Brown 2004).

The products to be used as reference points for the university students participating in this study are gender-related products: Condoms, Male Underwear, Feminine Hygiene Products, and Female Underwear. These were chosen as it was felt that these products would generate variance of perceptions of "offensiveness" among this population of respondents, particularly between gender and age groups, than some other controversial products/services, like charities, or political advertising. Based on previous studies (Waller 1999; Waller, Fam and Erdogan 2005) and including those suggested by the Advertising Standards Bureau of Australia, eleven different items were presented to the respondents to give them choices in determining specific execution techniques as reasons for taking offense. These were: Anti-Social Behavior, Concern for Children, Hard Sell, Health and Safety Issues, Indecent Language, Nudity, Racist Image, Sexist Image, Stereotyping of People, Subject Too Personal, and Violence (although after undertaking a Factor Analysis, the item Subject Too Personal did not load well onto any of the Factors, and was dropped from further analysis).

METHODOLOGY

To ascertain the degree to which the subjects took offense at the advertising of controversial products, a questionnaire was developed and distributed to a large convenience sample of students at a large urban university in Australia. The rationale for using university students as subjects relies heavily on the fact that this has been a research method practiced overseas for many years, mainly due to easy accessibility to the researcher and homogeneity as a group (Calder, Phillips and Tybout 1981). Also, as many scholars have stated over the years, as long as the stimulus material used is relevant to college students and the context of the research project is also relevant to them, there is no threat to internal validity of any results uncovered, *ceteris paribus*. Finally, student samples have already been used in controversial advertising studies by Rehman and Brooks (1987), Tinkham and Weaver-Lariscy (1994), Waller (1999), and Fam, Waller and Erdogan (2004).

A total of 265 university students studying Business were surveyed (120 male and 145 female). The average age of the total sample was 22.34 with ages ranging from 18 to 53 years old. Age has been suggested as an important variable in determining whether or not people take offense to advertising messages, and there is some evidence that older people tend toward being more offended by controversial advertisements (Fahy, Smart, Pride and Ferrell 1995). To determine if there were any differences between the older and younger university students in this research, the respondents were categorized and grouped into two age groups: 21 or less and 22 and older. In Australia, people who are 22 years and older can claim "mature age student" status if they would like to enroll for a degree, and, generally, if a student enrolls directly from High School at 18 and studies for a three-year degree, students would be graduating at the age of 21. Therefore, if university students in

Australia are older than 21, they have probably worked, taken a "gap" year or traveled at some stage, giving them some real-world experience apart from full-time study. Therefore, when looking at age differences of university students in this study, a comparison based on those aged 21 or less and 22 and older makes sense.

The questionnaire took between approximately 10 and 15 minutes to complete and was administered in a classroom environment. There were two main sections of the questionnaire. One consisted of the list of products/services referred to earlier as those deemed likely to be controversial to the typical university student. The other section consisted of the list of themes/executional styles referred to earlier as potential causes of taking offense. In both sections, respondents filled out five-point, bi-polar evaluation scales. In each instance, the respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which the item on the list was felt to be offensive to them in an advertising context. In each case, 1 meant "Not At All" offensive and 5 meant "Extremely" offensive.

RESULTS

Gender-Related Products

The 265 respondents were presented with a list of products for which they indicated their general level of personal offense. As can be discerned from perusing Table 1, below, none of the products were perceived to be especially offensive (overall mean offensiveness perceptions did not even approach the mid-point [3] of the five-point scale used), which may be due to the sample being mostly younger university students going to school in a cosmopolitan westernized city; and this outcome also conforms to Waller's (1999) results from an earlier study.

Of the four gender-related products, condoms were perceived to be most offensive when advertised, followed by Feminine Hygiene Products, Men's Underwear and Women's Underwear (Table 1). However, comparing genders using ANOVA, the females in the study were more offended by Condoms and Women's Underwear advertisements than the males at the .05 level of significance.

Advertisements for Feminine Hygiene Products were perceived to be more offensive to males and people 22 years old and older at the .10 level. Feminine Hygiene Products was also the only product category to reveal significant differences for both the gender and age comparisons. These results answer research objective # 1.

TABLE 1
MEAN OFFENSIVENESS PERCEPTIONS OF ADVERTISEMENTS
FOR GENDER-RELATED PRODUCTS

| PRODUCT | TOTAL | Males | Females | 21 or less | 22+ |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Condoms | 2.56 (1.25) | 2.36 (1.19) | 2.73 ** (1.27) | 2.62 (1.30) | 2.47 (1.15) |
| Feminine Hygiene Products | 2.39 (1.23) | 2.53 (1.24) | 2.27 * (1.21) | 2.27 (1.22) | 2.56 * (1.25) |
| Men's Underwear | 1.98 (1.08) | 2.05 (1.13) | 1.91 (1.03) | 1.88 (1.06) | 2.07 (1.20) |
| Women's Underwear | 1.91 (1.12) | 1.75 (1.01) | 2.04 ** (1.20) | 1.83 (1.08) | 1.98 (1.16) |

Notes:

Mean Scores are in **boldface**; Standard Deviations are in parentheses.

* = $p < .10$

** = $p < .05$

Execution Technique Factors

The respondents were presented with a list of advertising execution techniques, which have been offered as potential reasons for taking offense at mass media advertising, and for which they indicated their general level of personal offense. The total sample indicated offense to the majority of reasons (as revealed in Table 2, mean offensiveness scores were greater than 3) except Nudity, Health & Safety Issues, and Anti-social Behavior. Racist Images was generally perceived as the most

offensive (Table 2). A Principal Components Factor Analysis resulted in four factors: Discriminatory (Stereotyping of People, Sexist Image, Racist Image); Traditional (Indecent Language, Nudity, Anti-social Behavior, Violence); Personal/Family Impact (Health & Safety Issues; Concern for Children); and Hard Sell (Hard Sell). Of the four factors, three of them (Discriminatory, Traditional, and Personal/Family Impact) have reasonably strong reliability, with Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.70. The Hard Sell factor was composed of a single item.

TABLE 2
EXECUTION FACTORS

| | Individual Execution Techniques | Mean (St Dev) | I | II | III | IV |
|---|--|----------------------|----------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| Discriminatory Factor Mean = 3.70 Cronbach's Alpha = .774 % of variance = 21.809 Cumulative % = 21.809 | Stereotyping of People | 3.38 (1.11) | .817 | | | |
| | Sexist Image | 3.60 (1.28) | .791 | | | |
| | Racist Image | 4.12 (1.07) | .742 | | | |
| Traditional Factor Mean = 3.09 Cronbach's Alpha = .725 % of variance = 20.135 Cumulative % = 41.944 | Indecent Language | 3.05 (1.23) | | .794 | | |
| | Nudity | 2.92 (1.28) | | .784 | | |
| | Anti-social Behavior | 2.84 (1.20) | | .595 | | |
| | Violence | 3.55 (1.28) | | .538 | | |
| Personal/Family Impact Factor Mean = 3.00 Cronbach's Alpha = .731 % of variance = 14.614 Cumulative % = 56.558 | Health & Safety Issues | 2.87 (1.34) | | | .889 | |
| | Concern for Children | 3.12 (1.39) | | | .862 | |
| Hard Sell Factor Mean = 3.18 % of variance = 11.033 Cumulative % = 67.591 | Hard Sell | 3.18 (1.18) | | | | .846 |

Reasons for Offensiveness

A few executional techniques were claimed to be not especially offensive (mean score under 3) by the various student groups, with Health & Safety Issues being the only theme being considered not offensive in all groups. Comparing genders by using ANOVAs, females were significantly more offended than males for Sexist Image, Violence, Stereotyping of People, Indecent Language, and Nudity. In particular, the female students indicated being offended by advertisements with Indecent Language, Subject Too Personal, and Nudity executional

strategies, while the males did not find these approaches offensive. This can be due to the fact that women are often the objects of sexism, stereotyping and nudity, and are less inclined to performing acts of violence and using indecent language. Looking at age, the older student group was significantly more offended by advertisements with Violence, Hard Sell, Concern for Children, and Anti-social Behavior. This outcome makes sense given that older students tend to be more conservative and more concerned with issues like child welfare and anti-violence. These results answer objective 2.

TABLE 3
PERCEIVED OFFENSIVENESS OF
ADVERTISING EXECUTION TECHNIQUES

| | TOTAL | Males | Females | 21 or less | 22+ |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Discriminatory Factor | | | | | |
| Stereotyping of People | 3.38 (1.11) | 3.18 (1.21) | 3.56** (.99) | 3.36 (1.11) | 3.42 (1.13) |
| Sexist Image | 3.60 (1.28) | 3.18 (1.38) | 3.95** (1.07) | 3.68 (1.31) | 3.50 (1.24) |
| Racist Image | 4.12 (1.07) | 4.06 (1.06) | 4.17 (1.08) | 4.10 (1.08) | 4.16 (1.05) |
| Traditional Factor | | | | | |
| Indecent Language | 3.05 (1.23) | 2.71 (1.23) | 3.33** (1.16) | 2.94 (1.24) | 3.18 (1.21) |
| Nudity | 2.92 (1.28) | 2.50 (1.31) | 3.26** (1.15) | 2.95 (1.25) | 2.84 (1.34) |
| Anti-social Behavior | 2.84 (1.20) | 2.78 (1.17) | 2.90 (1.23) | 2.61 (1.20) | 3.20** (1.14) |
| Violence | 3.55 (1.28) | 3.14 (1.36) | 3.90** (1.11) | 3.36 (1.32) | 3.87** (1.16) |
| Personal/Family Impact | | | | | |
| Health & Safety Issues | 2.87 (1.34) | 2.75 (1.32) | 2.98 (1.36) | 2.86 (1.30) | 2.87 (1.40) |
| Concern for Children | 3.12 (1.39) | 3.02 (1.40) | 3.20 (1.38) | 2.99 (1.33) | 3.31* (1.47) |
| Hard Sell | | | | | |
| Hard Sell | 3.18 (1.18) | 3.24 (1.28) | 3.14 (1.09) | 2.95 (1.16) | 3.53** (1.12) |

Note: mean offensiveness scores are in **boldface**; standard deviations are in parentheses.

* $p < .10$

** $p < .05$

Correlating Products and Reasons for Taking Offense

To answer research objective 3, a correlation analysis of the perceived offensiveness ratings between the four product categories and each of the various creative execution techniques was conducted using Pearson's Correlation Coefficient formula (Table 4). Significant relationships (defined here as r 's greater than + or - 0.30) were found between Condoms and Indecent Language, and

Condoms and Nudity; as well as Women's Underwear and Nudity. Other significant associations ($p < .01$) were found between Condoms and Sexist Image; Feminine Hygiene Products and Anti-Social Behavior, Feminine Hygiene Products and Hard Sell; Men's Underwear and Anti-social Behavior, Men's Underwear and Nudity; Women's Underwear and Indecent Language, and Women's Underwear and Sexist Image. These results answer objective 3.

TABLE 4
CORRELATION OF OFFENSIVENESS PERCEPTIONS FOR
PRODUCT CATEGORIES AND EXECUTION TECHNIQUES

| PRODUCT | Condoms | Feminine Hygiene Products | Men's Underwear | Women's Underwear |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Execution Techniques | | | | |
| Discriminatory Factor | | | | |
| Stereotyping of People | .153* (.014) | .059 (.350) | .086 (.171) | .108 (.085) |
| Sexist Image | .240** (.000) | .087 (.164) | .010 (.875) | .171** (.006) |
| Racist Image | .174* (.005) | .019 (.767) | .026 (.673) | .098 (.115) |
| Traditional Factor | | | | |
| Indecent Language | .394** (.000) | .090 (.149) | .157* (.012) | .269** (.000) |
| Nudity | .444** (.000) | .045 (.471) | .233** (.000) | .417** (.000) |
| Anti-social Behavior | .144* (.021) | .168** (.007) | .207** (.001) | .104 (.095) |
| Violence | .243* (.000) | .100 (.109) | .129 (.038) | .110 (.077) |
| Personal/Family Impact | | | | |
| Health & Safety Issues | .138* (.028) | .146* (.019) | .105 (.095) | .123 (.050) |
| Concern for Children | .154* (.014) | .090 (.149) | .041 (.509) | .020 (.745) |
| Hard Sell | | | | |
| Hard Sell | .090 (.155) | .190** (.002) | .095 (.135) | .140* (.027) |

Note: Pearsonian Correlation Coefficients are in **boldface**; 2-tailed significance levels are in ().

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

CONCLUSION

This study presented the results of a survey of 265 university students to determine whether they perceive particular gender-related products as offensive, what execution techniques lead them to take offense, and to

calculate correlations to discover any potential association between offensiveness perceptions toward particular gender-related products and specific execution techniques. Overall, it appears that while those sampled indicated that they did not take offense when any of the four controversial product categories were

advertised, they did find a number of execution techniques for advertisements as being offensive. These university students perceived the creative executions as more of an indication of why an advertisement is personally offensive than the controversial products per se, a finding that replicates results from earlier research conducted by Waller (1999). Also, there were significant differences in the offensiveness perceptions with gender being more of a determinant of offensiveness than age, as females were more offended compared to the males, specifically with regard to perceptions towards advertisements for Condoms and Women's Underwear, as well as advertisements that have Sexist Images, Violence, Stereotyping, Indecent Language, and Nudity.

To establish any potential association between specific gender-related products and offensive execution techniques, a correlation analysis of the results between the four controversial products and reasons for the offense was conducted. A number of statistically significant associations were uncovered. In particular, significant perceived offensiveness relationships were found between Condoms and Indecent Language, Condoms and Nudity, and Condoms and Subject Too Personal. A significant association was also uncovered between offensiveness perceptions of the product category Women's Underwear and the executional technique of using Nudity. These results cannot speak to cause and effect questions, but they are suggestive nevertheless.

For those marketers involved with controversial products/services or controversial campaigns directed toward university students, it appears that they should be aware of the potential to offend. Although some campaigns aim to be controversial, care should be made to ensure that they are not racist, sexist, or have violent images, particularly when targeting the female university student market. Offending the members of such a target group can result in negative effects, like a drop in sales, an

increase in complaints, negative word-of-mouth, or, at an extreme level, a boycotting of the product. Any of the aforementioned can reflect poorly on the brand, the company and even the agency behind the campaign. Those companies with controversial products should then be aware of what issues are the ones that offend their customers, and be socially responsible enough to refrain from being openly offensive. For example, condom manufacturers choosing to target university students might consider refraining from advertisements that bluntly use indecent language, nudity, or sexist images, if they intend to advertise without causing too much offense. However, it is still up to the advertiser to decide on the right communication strategy for their controversial product.

Limitations

Further research should be undertaken into attitudes towards controversial products and offensive advertising. While this study uncovered some interesting findings, it is very limited in that the study was undertaken with a university student sample, sampling was not random, it only examined the offensiveness perceptions of the advertising of four gender-related product categories (none which proved to be perceived as particularly controversial by the student respondents), and, due to research design limitations, it could not discover why the respondents found certain executions to be offensive. Also, offensive advertising can depend on the context, and so may vary depending on the product, brand, target audience, timing and media.

Future studies could also endeavor to measure levels of offensiveness towards specific advertisements, comparing offensiveness with variables in addition to gender and age, such as religion, education, personality, race/ethnicity, and type of mass media, etc., and a cross-cultural comparison could be made to determine whether views

hold across different countries/cultures. It is important for advertisers to develop an understanding of the relationship between their communicated advertising messages and their targeted customers, and the community in general. Advertisers should also take on some social responsibility for the messages being presented, as the last thing an advertiser should want to do is to offend its customers and cause a negative reaction in the wider marketplace.

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