

AWARENESS TOWARDS OFFENSIVE ADVERTISING AND ITS IMPACT ON PURCHASE INTENTION

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ABSTRACT

Global and local brands are fighting over consumers' attention. Global and local brands are fighting over consumers' attention. As consumers are inundated in thousands of advertisements daily, advertisers are struggling to find the best method to generate the most brand visibility. The sexual appeal approach is the fastest and easiest way to catch one attention, but it brings negative emotion, which will lead to negative behaviour among consumers. This study aims to understand consumers' perception and attitude towards offensive advertising focusing on controversial products, sexual appeal approach and gender-role portrayal approach. This research sample was gathered from diploma students of Faculty of Communication and Media Studies in UiTM using a questionnaire survey. The result shows that gender-role portrayal are the most offensive approach, guns and armaments are the most controversial products and offensive advertising brings negative impact to consumers' purchase intention.

Key words: Advertising, consumer behaviour, offensive advertising, purchase intention

INTRODUCTION

The World Advertising Research Centre (WARC) predicted a 7.1% increase in global advertising investment in 2020 pre-Covid-19 pandemic. As of August 2020, the advertising industry experienced 8.1% decreased in advertising expenditure that is almost US\$50 billion because of changes in consumer behaviour (Rohiman Haroon, 2020). Advertisers are not only becoming more prudent in advertising expenditure to reach their audience, but they are also being wary in curating advertising messages and content to avoid being insensitive towards the current situation where Covid-19 news and content relatedness are more important to public (Daljit Dhesi, 2020).

Advertisers and brands used out of the box and creative approaches in maintaining businesses during this difficult time. In March 2020, products with the bogus claim that can curb the Covid-19 infections appear in the Malaysia market. The public trusted claims that tags known as Antah Wellness Defend Health tag or Virus Shut Out appear as a controversial product alongside with "singgang" dish and drinking warm water can prevent the novel coronavirus infection (Ben, 2020). This level of trust may have caused by the dire needs of consumers' attention and sales.

As creativity is crucial in attracting consumers' attention, many advertisers are becoming more and more insensitive in delivering messages. Malaysia Airlines' subsidiary company Firefly Airline once had to issue an apology posting when the public criticized their advertisement published both online and, in the newspaper, which objectified women (Kitching, 2016). Rosmawati et. al. (2019) conducted a study on three health products namely Almas Jus Nusantara, Qu Puteh Million Cell and D'Herbs Losyen Putih Susu which revealed that there were excessive hyperbolic sentences, gender-role portrayals and inappropriate body languages unsuitable for public viewing. Rakesh et al., (2018) said that religion constraints, cultural issues and mindsets are the contributing factors to Malaysian negative attitudes towards sexual appeal advertising.

Consumers' attention is indeed the essence of advertising and marketing campaign. Advertisers hoped to maximise the impact of high advertising expenditure by delivering messages to as many consumers as they can reach. Although sexual connotations, indecent language, sexist and nudity in advertising may attract consumers attention, the effects it has upon consumer behaviour is still questionable. What type of product is suitable to go along with offensive approaches, and how will consumer react upon it?

Hence, advertisers need to understand the consumers' perception of advertising approaches and the effects on consumer behaviour. Having to understand the level of awareness, knowledge and consumers' attitude towards offensive advertising is crucial to advertisers as this may help to maintain the brand image and save a lot of money. This study will focus on three types of offensive advertising which are controversial product, the sexual appeal and gender-role portrayal in advertising. There are two research objectives for this study which are; 1) to identify consumer perceptions towards offensive advertising and 2) to identify consumer purchase intentions towards offensive advertising approaches.

OFFENSIVE ADVERTISING AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

The definition and interpretation of offensive advertising have evolved together with time. This study uses the term “offensive advertising” as reviews of past research revealed that the terminology used widely as compared to its other synonyms. Words or terms that carry negative emotions such as “disgust”, “provocative” and “shock advertising” or also known as “shockvertising” can be found in various research paper before (Klimin & Tikhonov, 2016). Myers et al., (2020), on the other hand, used “taboo” as the terms in their much recent study.

A study by Chan & Yeung (2016) found that controversial advertisements draw negative emotions towards consumers due to the product nature or its style of execution. Myers et al. (2020) supported Chan & Yeung that consumers may be provoked and offended by the advertising execution or advertised products.

In a day, a person gets exposed to thousands of advertisements. Therefore, advertisers are more inclined to use controversial approaches in delivering messages to their target audiences. According to Myers et al., (2020), the advertisers were purposely using shock appeal to create awareness. Such an approach is found to be more effective towards young and educated people as they are more open-minded and willing to challenge the social norms (Chan & Yeung, 2016).

According to Mohd & Mohd (2017), advertising becomes controversial when people get offended by it. Five controversial issues in advertising as listed by Gurrieri, Govan & Cherrier (2016) include death, suffering, nudity, sex and violence. Meanwhile, Mohd & Mohd (2017) indicates that the causes of an advertisement to be deemed as offensive are sexual connotations, evoking unnecessary fear, sexist, indecent language, subject too personal, nudity and deceptive or misleading.

Fam et al., (2013) in their study found that dislike ability of an advertisement has a direct impact towards consumer behaviour as the more offensive an advertisement is, the more dislikeable the product will be. They also found that consumers will have low purchase intentions on products with less likeable advertisements. This statement is supported by Shaizatulaqma et al. (2016) that consumers who have positive attitudes towards an advertisement are easy to be persuaded by it. According to Mohd & Mohd (2017), society is more concerned about advertising ethics violated by advertisers. As an example, advertisement of alcohol or cigarette will impact the Muslim consumers’ purchase intention not due to religious factors but because it will bring harmful impact to the children.

SEXUAL APPEAL ADVERTISING

According to Liu et al., (2009), the advantages of using sexual appeal in advertising is to attract attention, generate emotional responses and a persuasive factor. The study then found that advertisement contains sexual appeal images and messages are more favorable to consumers. However, a much recent study conducted by Hermannsdóttir & Gunnarsdóttir (2015) in Iceland found that usage of sexual appeal in advertising brings negative effects towards consumers’ attitude. They further discussed in the study that the use of sexual attraction in advertising for products unrelated to sexuality is, harmful, offending and affecting consumers’ purchase intention. This argument was then supported by a study conducted by Rakesh et. al., (2018) that says negative consumer perception will decrease the purchase intention. It was also found that sexual appeals acceptance among consumers are closely related to culture (Hermannsdóttir & Gunnarsdóttir, 2015).

Culture and religions shape the society that we live in. Cross culture study conducted by Chan et al., (2007), Liu et al., (2009) & Fam et al., (2010) explained that low-context culture society such as in America, Germany & northern European countries are more open towards offensive advertising than high-context culture society such as in Korea, Taiwan and Japan. On the other hand, consumers with high religiosity level were more offended by offensive advertising than the low religiosity level consumers as revealed by De Run et al., (2010) & Shaizatulaqma et al., (2016) who ran a study on Malay Muslim in Malaysia. Although there are various levels of acceptance among consumers across culture and religion, sexual appeal is the most effective approach to attract consumers’ attention. Therefore, it is highly unlikely for advertisers to stop using sexual appeal approach even though they were severely criticized (Shafiq et al., 2015).

GENDER-ROLE ADVERTISING

Gender-role stereotyping in advertising has been around for a long time (De Luca (2020). The men and women symbolism in advertisement portrays power relations and stereotype on both genders (Gurrieri, Govan & Cherrier, 2016). Advertisers often depict women as the inferior gender, objectifying and stereotyping them while men are the opposites. Women were portrayed as wife, mother, bride, waitress and dancer (Duriyya & Zahid, 2009), doing housewives roles, taking care of the house or children (De Luca, 2020). Men, on the contrary, were presented as tough, earning money and caring little for others (Ordeken et al., 2002) showed on a higher level, important job positions, making adventurous activities, taking care of their family or their house (De Luca, 2020).

Duriyya & Zahid (2009) comparative study shows that women in Western countries are more critical towards gender-role advertising. The portrayal of women in occupational roles and a higher level of self-declared female autonomy are more acceptable to these women, and offensive advertising may affect their buying behaviour as opposed to Eastern women (Duriyya & Zahid, 2009).

De Luca (2020) in her study, analyzing two women age groups found various levels of acceptance among the older and younger generation of women towards sexist-offensive advertising appeals. The study found that older women have a more negative attitude

towards explicit and objectified women representation, more offended by the pictures used and less likely to purchase the product containing sexist-offensive advertisements. The younger generation, on the other hand, was more open on explicit and objectified women representation, more offended by the copy used, consider sexist-offensive advertising as something likeable and desirable hence will not affect the purchase intention (De Luca, 2020).

CONTROVERSIAL PRODUCTS

Various past studies identified and categorized a few products and services as controversial products due to its characteristic that was deemed inappropriate to be discussed in public (Waller et al., 2005) or may harm public health (Mohd & Mohd, 2017). The products include alcohol, charities, cigarettes, condoms, female contraceptives, female hygiene products, female underwear, funeral services, gambling, guns and armaments, male underwear, pharmaceuticals, political parties, racially extremist groups, religious denominations, sexual diseases, weight loss programs (Waller et al., 2005), chat line services, massage parlour and pharmaceutical (Mohd & Mohd, 2017). De Run et al., (2010) later categorized these products under four groups of offensive products which are gender/sex-related products, social/political groups, addictive products and health & care products.

Mohd & Mohd (2017) study that conducted in Northern India found that level of acceptance on a controversial product also depends on one's culture and religion. Muslim consumers are more offended towards alcohol compared to cigarettes due to Islam restriction to alcohol consumptions, but no rules mentioned for cigarettes (Mohd & Mohd, 2017). Advertisements of products such as women undergarments are more acceptable to the public living in Western countries such as United Kingdom and France where most of the citizens are non-Muslims as opposed to Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey (De Run et al., 2010). A recent study by Khairawati & Murtadlo (2020) that was conducted in Yogyakarta recommended advertisers to adapt to the norm, culture and religion. Products deemed controversial and taboo to a norm, culture or religion should be avoided.

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to understand consumer perception towards offensive advertising and its impact on purchase intention. A quantitative approach was used in conducting this research. Survey forms were distributed to 114 students of semester 4 from Faculty of Communication and Media Studies in Universiti Teknologi Mara Cawangan Negeri Sembilan, Kampus Rembau. These students were selected to be the respondents of this study because they have taken ADV241 (Advertising) subject; hence they will have a better understanding on the topic discussed.

The questionnaire consisted of a few sections which gathered demographic data of the respondents as well as evaluate respondents' perception and purchase intention towards offensive advertising. A Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1 represents not offensive at all and 5 represents extremely offensive) is used to measure the respondents' perceptions on offensive advertising while likert scale of 1 to 5 (1 represents strongly disagree and 5 represents strongly agree) is used to measure the respondents' purchase intention on offensive advertising. This research measured the frequency and percentage of each variable to achieve its research objectives.

FINDINGS

BACKGROUND OF RESPONDENTS

The result shows that majority of the respondents are female with 77.2% and 22.8% are male. 84.2% are from the age of 20 years old and below while 15.8% of the respondents are between the age of 21 to 25 years old. Out of the 114 respondents, 84.2% resides in urban area, meanwhile the other 15.8% lives in rural area. Details indication are presented in below Table 1.

Table 1: Respondents' background (n=114)

| Item | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 26 | 22.8% |
| Female | 88 | 77.2% |
| Age | | |
| 20 year and below | 96 | 84.2% |
| 21 to 25 years old | 18 | 15.8% |
| Residential Area | | |
| Urban | 96 | 84.2% |
| Rural | 15.8% | 15.8% |

PERCEPTION TOWARDS OFFENSIVE ADVERTISING

Table 2 shows respondents’ perception towards offensive advertising. More than half of the respondents feel strongly offended towards sexist or gender-role portrayal (51.8%), nudity (50.9%) as well as violence (50.9%). Half of the respondents (50%) felt somewhat offended towards advertisements that use evoking unnecessary fear approach. Details are presented further in Table 2.

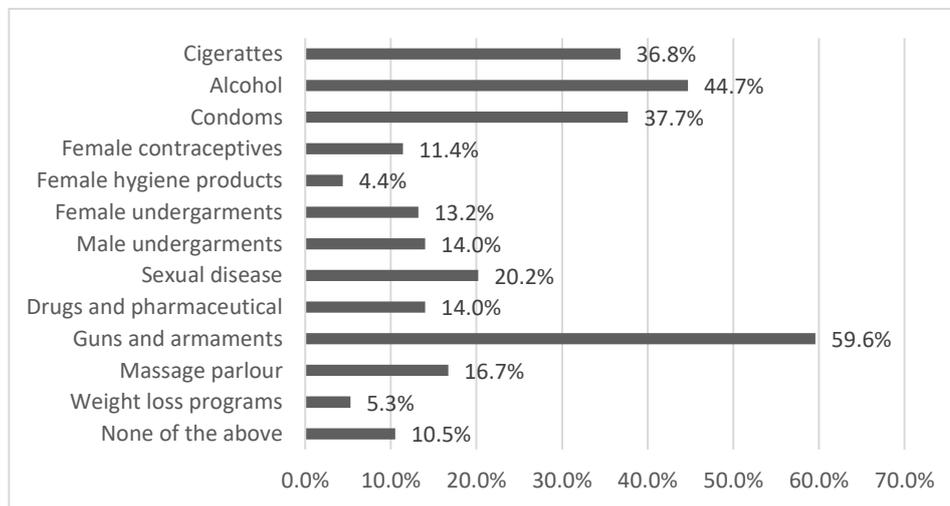
Table 2: Perception towards offensive advertising (n=114)

| Item | Not offensive at all | Not very offensive | Neutral | Somewhat offensive | Extremely offensive |
|---|----------------------|--------------------|---------|--------------------|---------------------|
| How do you feel about advertisements that use sexual appeal approach? | 0% | 7.0% | 31.6% | 43.0% | 18.4% |
| How do you feel about advertisements that use evoking unnecessary fear approach? | 1.7% | 5.3% | 30.7% | 50% | 12.3% |
| How do you feel about advertisements that use sexist or gender-role portrayal approach? | 0.9% | 5.3% | 17.5% | 24.5% | 51.8% |
| How do you feel about advertisements that use indecent language approach? | - | 8.8% | 28.9% | 41.2% | 21.1% |
| How do you feel about advertisements that use nudity approach? | - | 5.3% | 19.3% | 24.5% | 50.9% |
| How do you feel about advertisements that use deceptive or misleading approach? | - | 6.1% | 26.3% | 39.5% | 28.1% |
| How do you feel about advertisements that use violence approach? | 0.9% | 4.4% | 14.9% | 28.9% | 50.9% |

CONTROVERSIAL PRODUCTS

Figure 1 shows controversial products that deem inappropriate by respondents. Guns and armaments are the most inappropriate product to be advertised to the public with 59.6% followed by alcohol (44.7%), condoms (37.7%) and cigarettes (36.8%). Meanwhile, respondents feel that female hygiene products (4.4%) and weight loss programs (5.3%) are the least controversial products. Details of findings are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Controversial products (n=114)



CONSUMERS’ PURCHASE INTENTION

More than half of the respondents hold a negative attitude towards purchasing products that use offensive approaches in the advertisements. Respondents responded on questions asking about their willingness to buy products that use offensive approaches in their advertisements and majority of them answered strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively on purchasing products with deceptive or misleading information (79.8%), violence (78%) and nudity (69.3%). Details of the finding shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Purchase intention on offensive advertising (n=114)

| Item | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| I would buy products that use sexual appeal approach in their advertisement. | 16.7% | 37.7% | 37.7% | 7.0% | 0.9% |
| I would buy products that use evoking unnecessary fear in their advertisement. | 24.6% | 43.8% | 28.1% | 2.6% | 0.9% |
| I would buy products that use sexist or gender-role portrayal in their advertisement. | 23.7% | 42.1% | 29.8% | 3.5% | 0.9% |
| I would buy products that use indecent language in their advertisement. | 25.4% | 28.1% | 36.8% | 8.8% | 0.9% |
| I would buy products that use nudity in their advertisement. | 34.2% | 35.1% | 24.5% | 5.3% | 0.9% |
| I would buy products that use deceptive or misleading in their advertisement. | 40.4% | 39.4% | 16.7% | 2.6% | 0.9% |
| I would buy products that use violence in their advertisement. | 41.2% | 36.8% | 20.2% | 0.9% | 0.9% |

Respondents also responded to questions relating to their willingness to purchase product categories that use sexual appeal approaches in their advertisements. It shows that the respondents have neutral purchase intention for apparel & clothing (52.6%), fragrances & cosmetics (50%), hair & beauty services (50%) as well as fitness centres & health clubs (50%). Meanwhile, they hold negative attitudes as they both strongly disagreed and disagreed on purchasing electronic & household appliances (57.9%), food & beverages (57.8%) and cigarettes and alcohol (57.1%). Details of the finding are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Purchase intention on sexual appeal advertisements (n=114)

| Item | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| I would buy apparels & clothing products that use sexual appeal approach in their advertisements | 7.1% | 10.5% | 52.6% | 21.9% | 7.9% |
| I would buy lingerie & underwear products that use sexual appeal approach in their advertisements | 6.1% | 7.9% | 46.5% | 28.1% | 11.4% |
| I would buy fragrances & cosmetics products that use sexual appeal approach in their advertisements | 6.1% | 14.0% | 50% | 20.2% | 9.7% |
| I would buy food & beverages products that use sexual appeal approach in their advertisements | 28.9% | 28.9% | 28.9% | 7.9% | 5.4% |
| I would buy personal care products that use sexual appeal approach in their advertisements | 7.9% | 21.1% | 47.4% | 17.5% | 6.1% |
| I would buy cigarettes & alcohol products that use sexual appeal approach in their advertisements | 30.7% | 26.4% | 36.8% | 3.5% | 2.6% |
| I would buy electronic & household appliances products that use sexual appeal approach in their advertisements | 26.3% | 31.6% | 31.6% | 7% | 3.5% |
| I would buy automotive products that use sexual appeal approach in their advertisements | 23.6% | 32.5% | 32.5% | 7.9% | 3.5% |
| I would buy hair & beauty services that use sexual appeal approach in their advertisements | 15.8% | 11.4% | 50% | 17.5% | 5.3% |
| I would buy fitness centres & health clubs services products that use sexual appeal approach in their advertisement | 14.0% | 12.3% | 40% | 19.3% | 4.4% |

Respondents also responded to questions on their willingness to purchase product categories that use gender-role approaches in their advertisements. Table 6 shows that some of the respondents hold a negative attitude towards gender-role advertisements. They both strongly disagreed and disagreed to purchase cigarettes & alcohol products (47.4%) and food & beverages products (40.4%) that use gender-role approach in their advertisements. More than 40% responded to have neutral purchase intention. The details are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Purchase intention of gender-role advertisement (n=114)

| Item | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| I would buy apparels & clothing products that use gender-role approach in their advertisements | 7.9% | 7.9% | 47.4% | 25.4% | 11.4% |
| I would buy lingerie & underwear products that use gender-role in their advertisements | 7% | 11.4% | 43% | 26.3% | 12.3% |
| I would buy fragrances & cosmetics products that use gender-role approach in their advertisements | 12% | 14% | 47.4% | 23.7% | 6.1% |
| I would buy food & beverages products that use gender-role approach in their advertisements | 15.8% | 24.6% | 48.2% | 7% | 4.4% |
| I would buy personal care products that use gender-role approach in their advertisements | 12.3% | 8.8% | 47.4% | 21.9% | 9.6% |
| I would buy cigarettes & alcohol products that use gender-role approach in their advertisements | 27.2% | 20.2% | 43.9% | 6.1% | 2.6% |
| I would buy electronic & household appliances products that use gender-role approach in their advertisements | 13.1% | 20.2% | 55.3% | 7.9% | 3.5% |
| I would buy automotive products that use gender-role approach in their advertisements | 12.3% | 24.6% | 50% | 9.6% | 3.5% |
| I would buy hair & beauty services that use gender-role approach in their advertisements | 10.5% | 18.4% | 43.9% | 21.9% | 5.3% |
| I would buy fitness centres & health clubs services products that use gender-role approach in their advertisement | 11.4% | 21.1% | 46.5% | 14.9% | 6.1% |

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This paper aims to study consumers' awareness of offensive advertising and its impact on purchase intention. This paper studied three types of offensive advertising which include controversial products, sexual appeal approach and gender-role portrayal approach. The result of this simple study shows that sexist or gender-role portrayal is the most offensive advertising approach. Therefore, advertisers need to be more sensitive when portraying men and women in their campaign to avoid gender-roles portrayal that might offend the consumers. On a different note, the most inappropriate product to be advertisements to the mass markets are guns and armaments.

It was found that consumers have negative emotion towards offensive advertising which will impact their purchase intention. Respondents involved in this study are mostly reluctant to buy products or services that are deceptive or misleading. On top of that, they hold negative attitudes towards purchasing electronic & household appliances products that use sexual appeal approach and not willing to purchase cigarettes & alcohol products that use gender-role portrayal approach in advertising. These findings help advertisers to identify and understand their consumers' perception towards offensive advertising. It can help advertisers to sustain the right brand image while delivering messages to the consumers.

It is recommended for future researchers to expand this simple study to understand more on consumers' knowledge and acceptance towards advertising approaches. Firstly, future researchers may expand the research to larger sample size as this study gathers data from only 114 students. Second, this research only studied three types of offensive advertising. It is suggested for future researchers to study other types of offensive advertising approach such as evoking unnecessary fear, indecent language, nudity, deceptive and violence. Finally, future researchers can expand the research by making comparisons between gender, age groups or other demographic factors that may influence the findings of the research.

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