

# **DETERMINING ATTITUDINAL BELIEFS ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ADVERTISING**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to determine the beliefs about advertising of two controversial products, namely political parties and sexual diseases prevention. The theory of reasoned action was utilized as underlying premise to elicit beliefs about controversial advertising in order to understand the formation of attitude towards the advertising. A qualitative approach by means of personal interview was adopted to explore the relatively unknown phenomenon. Subsequently, 43 interviews were conducted in Sarawak and the transcripts were then content-analyzed by multiple coders. The findings show that there are 11 statements of belief for the advertising of political parties and 6 statements for the advertising of sexual diseases prevention. Although both types of advertising are primarily considered as a source of information, their descriptions are largely different. While the advertising of political parties is mainly believed to be giving misleading information and for personal interest, the advertising of sexual diseases prevention is regarded as a form of education when executed appropriately. Therefore, the former must be carried out with care to avoid negative responses, and the latter should be done fittingly. This articulates the underlying consideration that there are different beliefs by type of advertising, and about what might create controversy.

**Keywords:** Controversial Advertising; Belief; Political; Sex Diseases Prevention.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Marketers and business practitioners are constantly confronted with intricate tasks of targeting and promoting products to consumers effectively. Consequently, advertising with novel, fresh and even unorthodox ideas and themes is more than often needed, and hence used to generate awareness and interest in the marketplace (Jewler & Drewniany, 2001; Reid, *et al.*, 1998; Wells, *et al.*, 2003). Despite having laws to govern advertising and its activities, various advertising-related matters are left to the discretion of the senders, and are based mostly on ethical considerations (Wells, *et al.*, 2003). As a result, controversial images, slogans and subjects, including products that may potentially be seen as offensive when advertised, are frequently exploited (McIntyre, 2000; Pope, *et al.*, 2004). These have become more common over the last two decades with no sign of abatement (Pope, *et al.*, 2004; Severn, *et al.*, 1990).

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Even though a good number of studies have been dedicated to investigating attitude towards controversial advertising (De Run, *et al.*, 2010; Fam, *et al.*, 2004; Waller, 1999a, 1999b), there is still a dearth of knowledge as to what actually forms such attitude, which in turn predicts intention and behaviour.

Consequently, little is known about the specific descriptions pertaining to the attributes of controversial advertising, and the manner by which attitude towards them, often measured by the level of favorability in past literature, is actually formed. Moreover, despite the advancement of communication technology as seen in Internet and mobile devices, most of the studies focus on the western attitude towards such advertising (Fam, *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, this study aims utilize a qualitative approach to elicit the determinants of attitude towards the most and the least controversial products when they are being advertised and seen. The former is the advertising of political parties while the latter sexual diseases prevention. Using the theory of reasoned action (TRA) as the underlying basis, attitudinal beliefs will be looked into in order to elicit the descriptions that explain views about the product and articulate reasons why one holds certain attitude and intention towards controversial advertising.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. *Controversial Advertising*

Earlier findings have shown that controversial advertising was found to be predominantly viewed as something negative as it was described as unmentionables, offensive, intrusive and irritating, and socially sensitive (Aaker & Bruzzone, 1985; Bartos, 1981; Fahy, *et al.*, 1995; Li, *et al.*, 2002; Phau & Prendergast, 2001; Rehman & Brooks, 1987; Shao & Hill, 1994; Triff, *et al.*, 1987; Waller, 1999a; Wilson & West, 1981). It is often referred to when the advertising brings out reactions of embarrassment, distaste, disgust or outrage from a group of people when advertised and seen (Waller, 2005). It can easily turn out to be something offensive when it abuses the norm, and induces negative perceptions and reactions from the consumers (Dahl, *et al.*, 2003). Any of such negativity can be detrimental to advertising effectiveness and the product itself.

However, despite being controversial, there appears to be an increase in the amount of such advertising printed and broadcast (Fam & Waller, 2003). It is further intensified by the rapid progression of communication technologies since advertisements can now be seen by people in any part of the world (Waller & Fam, 2000). The rise of controversial advertising is mainly generated by the fact that advertising with fresh ideas and even unexpected elements can be successful in gaining awareness or winning attention and increasing profits in complex societies (Dahl, *et al.*, 2003; McIntyre, 2000; Pope, *et al.*, 2004; Waller, 1999b). As a result, understanding attitude towards controversial advertising becomes a major interest among marketing researchers and practitioners. Therefore it is of utmost importance to delve into the formation of attitude towards advertising so as to understand what makes the advertising controversial and how one differs from another.

Past researchers have studied products that are deemed controversial when advertised, and come out with 17 of them (De Run, *et al.*, 2010; Waller, *et al.*, 2005). These 17 products

are alcoholic products, charities, cigarettes, condoms, female contraceptives, female hygiene products, female underwear, funeral services, gambling, guns and armaments, male underwear, pharmaceuticals, political parties, racially extremist groups, religious denominations, sexual diseases prevention, and weight loss programs. However, only five of them are examined in the preliminary stage to ascertain their level of controversy due to contextual considerations which will be explained in later section. Then the most and the least controversial products are to be adopted as the context of the present study in order to elicit the beliefs about them respectively.

## **2.2. Theoretical Consideration**

In spite of the fact that qualitative inquiry is assumed in the study, the theory of reasoned action (TRA) is used as the underlying premise to look into beliefs about controversial advertising (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). TRA spells out clearly that an individual's behavioural intention to perform a behavior is mainly influenced by his attitude (Farley, *et al.*, 1981; Oliver & Bearden, 1985). Attitude, in turn, is predicted by his belief (Brackett & Carr, 2001; Ducoffe, 1996; Pollay & Mittal, 1993; Wang, *et al.*, 2009). Beliefs are mostly defined as specific statements about the attributes of objects, and they are antecedents of attitude, which is described as the summative evaluation of objects (Pollay & Mittal, 1993). Both consumers' belief and attitude towards advertising are known as important indicators of advertising effectiveness (Mehta, 2000). It is therefore surmised that the elicitation of beliefs about controversial advertising can contribute to better understanding of attitude towards the advertising (Ajzen, 1991).

## **2.3. Contextual Consideration**

Advertising activities in Malaysia are governed under Malaysian Code of Advertising Practices which promotes cultural sensitivity and social harmony in advertising and forbids advertisements that contain or insinuate statements which may upset the religious, racial, political or sentimental susceptibilities of any group of people (Deng, *et al.*, 1994). As such, this study excludes products that are either prohibited entirely or controlled firmly by the authorities when it comes to advertising since not everyone in the state would have seen the advertisements. These include addictive and gender-related products which are highly sensitive in nature and execution (Ting & de Run, 2012). In the same vein, all social and political products, with the exception of political parties, are taken out of the equation. Although the advertising of political parties is also regulated, it is still highly visible in public due to its pivotal role in election campaign in democratic countries, including Malaysia (Waller & Polonsky, 1996). As a result, twelve products are left out, and what remains are pharmaceuticals, weight loss programs, charities, sexual diseases prevention and political parties.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

Due to the explorative stance of the study, Sarawak, instead of Malaysia, was selected as the research site to establish initial findings that will serve as a precursor to a future nationwide study. Sarawak is the largest state in land size and the fourth most populated state in Malaysia, and it is as diverse as the whole nation (Department of Statistics, 2010). Over the years the state has emerged as a promising investment hub, and is becoming a lucrative market for businesses (Malaysian Rating Corporation Berhad, 2011). As such it is necessary to have in-

depth understanding of how Sarawakians view controversial advertising, and how their views affect their attitude towards it.

A preliminary study was administered to determine the most and the least controversial products across the five products using the Likert scale where 1 indicates the least controversial and 5 indicates the most controversial. 63 respondents were approached with an interview protocol (Hunt, *et al.*, 1982). As a result, the advertising of political parties was found to be the most controversial of all while the advertising of sexual diseases prevention the least. Subsequently, the main study was carried out, and personal interview was deemed the most useful method in drawing out in-depth information (Perry, 1998). As this is a qualitative study, the concept of data saturation or information replication rather than generalizability of data was the main emphasis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Therefore a sample of 30 respondents established in past studies was used as the minimum sample size in order to ascertain whether similar findings had started to replicate with additional interviews (Charmaz, 2006). Respondents were selected by means of purposeful sampling strategy to cater the purpose of the study (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

Before the actual interview, a pilot study was carried out with three persons in separate occasions to check whether the questions were clear enough for respondents to give relevant responses (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Funnel approach, beginning with the broad question ‘What are your beliefs about the advertising of political parties/sexual diseases prevention’ and ending with specific queries about the reasons behind their beliefs, was adopted during interview sessions (Churchill & Iacobucci, 2005; Hair, *et al.*, 2006; Kinnear & Taylor, 1995; Saunders, *et al.*, 2003). The actual interview took place in December of 2012, and consequently 43 interviews were conducted. Most interviews were conducted in the homes of the respondents at their convenience to ensure their comfort during interview sessions (Evers & De Boer, 2007; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2006; Weiss, 1994). All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were also checked to match against audio records (Kurasaki, 2000). Content analysis was used as it not only focuses at frequency counts (Wilkinson, 2000), but also allows for interpretation of themes in qualitative data (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Accordingly statements of belief in the transcripts were firstly coded by one of the researchers and two separate coders independently, and were later put together to finalize the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

#### 4. FINDINGS

The initial findings in preliminary study indicate the advertising of political parties is the most controversial advertising (Mean = 4.63), and the advertising of sexual diseases prevention is the least (Mean = 3.56). Both have no correlation, and are statistically different ( $t = 3.733$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ). The characteristics of the respondents were similar to that of the main study.

Table 1 presents the demographic details of the 43 interviewed respondents from various age and racial groups throughout Sarawak in the main study. Although 30 respondents were predetermined as the minimum sample size, 13 additional respondents were sampled to ensure information replication was achieved.

**Table 1:** Respondents' Profile

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Age-group	15 to 24	8	18.60
	25 to 34	7	16.28
	35 to 44	7	16.28
	45 to 54	7	16.28
	55 to 64	6	13.95
	65 and above	8	18.60
Race	Iban	14	32.56
	Malay	14	32.56
	Chinese	13	30.23
	Others	2	4.65
Gender	Male	24	55.81
	Female	19	44.19
Present Residence in Sarawak	Kuching city	17	39.53
	Sibu	5	11.63
	Miri city	3	6.98
	Others	18	41.86

#### 4.1. *Beliefs about Controversial Advertising*

Table 2 shows the 11 statements of belief about the advertising of political parties with their respective frequency counts. Three coders, including one of the researchers, coded the transcripts independently before coming together to finalize the themes (statements of belief). When comparing the themes, inter-coder agreement was above 80 percent, which exceeded what was generally required to secure data reliability (Kassarjian, 1977). It was found that most of the statements were actually revealed in the first 30 transcripts. Hence, only minor changes, especially in wordings, were made.

**Table 2:** Beliefs about the Advertising of Political Parties

<b>Belief Statements</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
It is a source of information.	23	21.30
Its message can often be misleading.	18	16.33
Its main goal is to generate interest for personal gain.	16	14.82
It is harmful to our country's welfare.	12	11.11
It is actually ineffective.	11	10.19
It is a waste of resources.	8	7.41
It can be offensive.	6	5.56
It can be an aid to more development.	5	4.63
It often makes false claims.	3	2.78
It is meaningless.	3	2.78
It is sometimes fun to watch.	3	2.78

The advertising of political parties was mainly believed to be a source of information (23 counts at 21.3%). However, the said advertising could also be misleading, for personal gain, harmful to the society at large, and ineffective. Out of the 11 statements, only 2 were found to be positive: it can be an aid to more development and it can be fun to watch. The findings indicate that the sentiments shared and expressed by the respondents towards the advertising were very negative.

In similar fashion, Table 3 shows the 6 statements of belief about sexual diseases prevention with inter-coder agreement of more than 80 percent as well (Kassarjian, 1977). Most of the statements of beliefs were also revealed in the first 30 transcripts. The additional transcripts were thus used to ensure there was no significant themes emerged from the interviews.

**Table 3:** Beliefs about the Advertising of Sexual Diseases Prevention

<b>Belief Statements</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
It is a source of information.	32	43.84
It is a form of education/instruction.	21	28.77
It benefits societal well-being.	9	12.33
It is actually ineffective.	7	9.59
It may generate unwanted curiosity.	3	4.11
It is a waste of resources.	1	1.37

The advertising of sexual diseases prevention was also predominantly believed to be a source of information (32 counts at 43.84%). It was also strongly regarded as a form of education or instruction (21 counts at 28.77%), thus benefitting societal well-being. Nevertheless, such advertising was also deemed ineffective and could generate unwanted curiosity. It was even viewed as a waste of resources.

## 5. DISCUSSIONS

### 5.1. *Beliefs about the Advertising of Political Parties*

Being a source of information, it suggests that political parties in Sarawak acknowledge the importance of being market-oriented by utilizing advertising to win trust and even elections (Lees-Marshament, 2001). Hence, the finding corresponds to past literature on the use of advertising by political parties to promote candidates and parties, explaining their policies and views (Ferguson, 1990; Kaid, *et al.*, 1986; Newman & Sheth, 1985; Wolton, 1990). The finding also corresponds to belief about advertising in general where it is primarily regarded as a source of product information (De Run & Ting, 2013; Pollay & Mittal, 1993).

However, despite acknowledging its role in providing information, most people also hold negative opinions about this particular advertising. The findings clearly show the advertising is largely believed to be misleading and for personal gain or interest. These descriptions may well illustrate intense competition between parties, and thus contrasting views from different groups

of supporters because they will consider whatever the other parties advertise is distrustful and mere gimmick to win (De Run, *et al.*, 2013). Moreover it can also be beliefs shared by neutrals or people who are not as aggressive in political arena. Such inference is made based on the statements that advertising is harmful to the country's welfare from a broader perspective, ineffective in its role, and a waste of resources. Same can be said about those who believe such advertising is good for development and fun to watch.

Other descriptions such as making false claims (deceptive), meaningless, and even offensive are equally alarming to say the least. While it is extremely difficult to change political views of any hardcore supporter, it is possible for a neutral and indecisive voter to change his attitude and intention towards political parties if he finds such advertising unpleasant. This may well suggest that the manner by which the advertising of political parties is executed can be much more of a concern than the product itself (Fam & Waller, 2003; Ting & de Run, 2012).

### **5.2. Beliefs about the Advertising of Sexual Diseases Prevention**

Although empirical studies have found that sexist issues and cultural insensitivity problems are some of the most commonly cited reasons for finding advertising offensive in the Asian context (Phau & Prendergast, 2001), most Sarawakians acknowledge the advertising of sexual diseases prevention as something for a good cause. In other words, the advertising of the seemingly controversial product does not necessarily make it controversial as well. Like advertising in general, the findings show the advertising of sexual diseases prevention also fulfils its primarily role as a provider of information (De Run & Ting, 2013; Pollay & Mittal, 1993). In addition, the belief statements reveal that most people, regardless of their age and race, accept the advertising as a form of education or instruction. It is also claimed that such advertising can benefit the society as a whole, especially the younger generations.

However, the advertising of such sensitive issue is not without contradicting views. It is regarded as futile if there is no channel such as seminar to explain sexual diseases and their preventive measures to younger generations and the public. Unlike political parties, some believe that sexual diseases prevention does not need mass advertising in Sarawak. If anything, it might generate unwanted curiosity about the social welfare in the state. Understandably the advertising is about prevention, but it does not mean it infers nor condones unethical sexual behaviours. Therefore it is imperative to maintain the advertising as a tool to inform and instruct people at suitable areas without overexerting it. It is also essential to get feedback from the target audience as to understanding whether the advertising along with its message is decoded in a way that it should be. This highlights that the amount of advertisement itself simply does not necessarily help the cause, rather the way it is advertised and communicated to the audience is what really matters.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Determining beliefs about controversial advertising is important in order to complement the understanding of how attitude towards controversial advertising is formed. Therefore beliefs about the advertising of political parties and sexual diseases prevention are elicited via

qualitative approach to elucidate the specific descriptions of each product's attributes when advertised and seen. This has articulated the underlying consideration of what might create controversy and why people find it controversial. The findings have explicitly shown that there are different beliefs by type of advertising, hence marketers must know what beliefs one holds for each advertisement. In other words, what creates controversy for one advertisement may not be the case for another. By making known what beliefs actually contribute to having attitude towards the two types of controversial advertising, marketers or relevant parties will then be able to design their advertising campaign effectively to present their products that is acceptable to the audience.

It is apparent that the study is only looking at two controversial products, and is limited to the context of Sarawak. As the level of exposure to global advertising is getting higher especially with younger generations, it is necessary to determine the beliefs about other controversial products, and to investigate how they affect attitude and behavioral intention in future studies. A nationwide study can also be conducted in similar fashion to provide a more comprehensive view about the subject matter. These qualitative findings can then be incorporated into quantitative studies so as to obtain empirical results with more rigorous theoretical and managerial implications.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper is based on research at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak under Geran Dana Principal Investigator (Grant no: 03/DPI07/823/2011 (07)). The authors express their gratitude to UNIMAS for sponsoring the research carried out.

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