

**Exploring the Opinion of Respondents towards Controversial Products in
Advertisements: A Study of Punjab**

Parvinder Pal Singh (Research Scholar, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar)

Parvinder3jan@gmail.com (Corresponding Author)

Harpreet Singh Chahal (Associate Professor, Guru Nanak Dev University, Regional campus,
Gurdaspur) Email: Chahal_hs@hotmail.com

Abstract:

Advertising continuously advertise their products to “cut through the clutter” using advertisements that could be considered controversial. Such controversial ads may include advertising controversial products or using controversial appeal. Plenty of research has been conducted in western countries about advertising controversial products and what could be the consumers’ response to that. We don’t come across any such study in India which explores the behaviour consumers towards controversial product. This study is a replicatory study of Fam and Waller (2003) that attempt to bridge this gap by investigating the consumer opinion in the state of Punjab towards advertising controversial products.

Keywords:

Controversial advertising; Controversial products; Punjab.

Introduction:

Previous research has discussed controversial products as “decent products”, “socially sensitive products” or “unmentionables” (Shao and Hill, 1994a; Rehman and Brooks, 1987; Wilson and West, 1981) and such ads advertising controversial products were termed as controversial advertisements. Controversial advertising is defined as “advertising that either by type of product or execution can elicit reactions of embarrassments, distaste, disgust, offense or outrage from one or more segments of population” (Waller, 2004). Some products due to their nature may be perceived controversial such as alcohol, contraceptive, female hygiene products (Wilson and West, 1995). Though, such products are legal to be advertised but are still considered controversial due to existing social norms and moral behaviour (Dean, 2012). Considerable amount of research has already been conducted on exploring the opinion of respondents in western countries but we don’t come across any study that explores the opinion of Indian consumers towards controversial products in advertisements. This study is

an attempt to bridge this gap by finding the opinion of consumers towards controversial products in Punjab, a state in Northern India.

Review of literature:

Wilson and West (1981) in their study called such products as unmentionables included “female hygiene, warfare, drugs for life-threatening diseases, birth control products”. He defined them “as products, services or concepts that for reasons delicacy or decency elicit reactions of distaste, offence or outrage when presented”.

Rehman and Brooks (1987) further conducted their study on such products including “feminine hygiene products, contraceptives, undergarments, pregnancy test kits, alcohol, and medications”. The study was conducted on students and results revealed that only all products except contraceptives were found acceptable.

Later on, Shao and Hill (1994a, 1994b) also conducted a study on controversial products including “alcohol, cigarettes, contraceptives, male undergarments, female undergarments, female hygiene products and ads on sexually transmitted diseases”. In the same year, Tinkham and Larisey (1994) discussed the controversy related to “political advertising”.

Fam et al. (1995) conducted a study on a larger sample towards “sensitive products”. He divided the sensitive products into three segments, namely “alcoholic beverages, products directed at children and health/sex related products”.

Waller (1999) conducted a study in Australia considering fifteen controversial products including “alcohol, cigarettes, condoms, female contraceptives, female hygiene products, female underwear, funeral services, gambling, male underwear, pharmaceuticals, political parties, racially extremist groups, religious denominations, sexually transmitted diseases, weight loss programmes” and found that people in Australia considered “racially extremists groups” as most controversial to be advertised followed by “religious denominations and female hygiene products”.

Kim-Shyan Fam et al. (2009) in their study explored the behaviour of respondents towards controversial products in China on the basis of demographic variables. The products tested in this study were “alcohol and condoms”. Results revealed that condom was considered more controversial than alcohol.

Though, these studies provide lot of information on consumers in different parts of the world, we are still unaware about the behaviour of consumers in India towards such products. We have conducted the present study to explore the opinion of consumers in Punjab.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The data for the present study has been collected with the help of a questionnaire through a survey. The sampling universe for the study was Punjab, a state in Northern India and the data has been collected from 300 respondents. Almost equal number of males and females were sampled in data collection. The respondents were given a list of 17 products that has been adopted from the study of Waller (1999). The responses were to be marked on a 5 point Likert scale that ranged from “not at all controversial” to “extremely controversial”. The list of products included in this study has been adopted from the earlier study of Fam and Waller (2003). The products included were “alcohol, cigarettes, condoms, female contraceptives, female hygiene products, female underwear, funeral services, gambling, male underwear, pharmaceuticals, political parties, racially extremist groups, guns and armaments, religious denominations, sexually transmitted diseases, weight loss programmes, charities,”. They were also asked questions regarding their demographic information. The sample contained 146 males and 154 females of which majority of the respondents were in the age group of 25-35. Initially, the obtained mean values of different products were calculated followed by factor analysis to find the different product categories arising from the list of given controversial products. The similar methodology has also been used by Fam and Waller (2003) where they used factor analysis to categorize different controversial products in their study conducted in Asia-Pacific.

RESULTS:

In order to find the most controversial group of products, the mean values of products were calculated. Higher mean values represented more controversial as scale ranged from “not at all controversial” to “extremely controversial”. Below table (I) presents the detailed obtained mean scores for the products with standard deviation.

The above table clearly shows that most of the respondents were found offended by “personal/sex” related products followed by “social products”. Clearly, “condoms” were found most controversial to be advertised followed by “female underwear” “female contraceptives” and “political parties”. Health related products were found least offensive and they included

TABLE (I)

Obtained Mean scores for associated controversy towards different controversial products

Product	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Alcohol	2.35	1.23
Cigarettes	2.23	1.10
Condoms	3.95	1.45
Female Contraceptives	3.11	1.22
Female Hygiene Products	2.75	1.08
Female Underwear	3.45	1.35
Funeral Services	2.70	0.98
Gambling	2.96	0.83
Male Underwear	2.83	0.89
Pharmaceuticals	1.86	0.71
Political Parties	3.05	1.12
Racially Extremist Groups	2.85	1.06
Religious Denominations	2.99	1.13
Sexually Transmitted Diseases	2.90	0.91
Weight Loss Programmes	1.75	0.89
Charities	1.83	.97
Guns and Armaments	2.14	.93

“weight loss programmes” and “pharmaceuticals”. “alcohol”, “cigarettes”, “gambling”, “racially extremist groups”, “sexually transmitted diseases”, “female hygiene products” and “religious denominations” received moderate response. This makes clear that respondents in Punjab get more offended by personal/sex related products when advertised in comparison to other controversial products.

It was followed by principal component analysis using varimax rotation in order to find the factors that could arise from the given list of products. In order to find the suitability of application of factor analysis, the KMO for the given set of data was found to be .809 and Bartlett’s test of Sphericity was found at significant at $p < .01$. Both the conditions were

fulfilled in order to perform Principle Component analysis. Details for KMO test and Bartlett's test of Sphericity has been provided in Table (II).

Table (II)**Obtained results for KMO Test and Bartlett's test of Sphericity**

Kaiser Meyers Olkin Test	.809
Bartlett's test of Sphericity	
Chi Square	8034.68
Degree of Freedom	429
Significance	.000

Principal component analysis revealed five factors. Cronbach's Alpha was performed to find the reliability of the obtained factors. All the factors showed reliability values greater than .70 as has been recommended by Hair et al. (2010). These obtained factors were named similar to the study of Fam and Waller (2003). The factors were named as "Gender related products", "Social products", "Addictive products", "Health related products" and in addition to these four factors, a fifth factor was also found which was missing in earlier studies. This factor was named as "Political factor".

Table (III)**Principal component analysis of controversial products**

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
Gender Related Products					
Condoms	.868				
Female underwear	.843				
Female contraceptives	.803				
Male underwear	.782				
Female hygiene products	.748				
Social Products					
Religious Denominations		.816			
Racially extremist groups		.792			

Funeral Services		.773			
Guns and Armaments		.712			
Addictive Products					
Gambling			.724		
Alcohol			.703		
Cigarettes			.685		
Health Care Products					
STD Prevention ads				.792	
Pharmaceuticals				.728	
Weight Loss Programs				.673	
Political Products					
Political Parties					.742
Charities					.717
% of variance	29.7 %	16.30%	10.23%	8.40%	4.39%
Eigen value	5.63	3.97	2.14	1.73	1.24
Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha)	.77	.73	.72	.70	.71

*STD Prevention ads= Sexually Transmitted Diseases prevention ads.

DISCUSSION:

The obtained results revealed five factors with first factor (Gender Related Products) explaining 29.7% of variance and having an eigen value of 5.63. The products included in this group were “Condom, female underwear, female contraceptives, male underwear, and female hygiene products”. The formation of this group is same as that of the study of Fam and Waller (2003). The most controversial product found here was “condoms” followed by “female underwear” and “female contraceptive”. Second obtained factor was named “Social Products” which explained the variance of 16.30% and had an eigen value of 3.97. The products included in this factor were “religious denominations, racially extremist groups, funeral services, guns and armaments”. The group showed a little different composition than the earlier study of Fam and Waller (2003). Their study found “political parties” also a part of this group but it was missing in our case. The third factor loaded three products and was named as “Addictive Products”. The products loaded in this factor were “gambling, alcohol and cigarette” of which gambling was considered as the most controversial product to be advertised. This factor explained a variance of 10.23% and an eigen value of 2.14,

respectively. Fourth factor explained a variance of 8.40% and had eigen value of 1.73. The group was named as “Health care products” and three products loaded on this factor. The products included “STD prevention ads, pharmaceuticals and weight loss programs”. The most controversial product in this group was considered “STD prevention ads” followed by “pharmaceuticals” and “weight loss programs”. In addition to these four factors, we obtained one additional factor that was missing in all other previous studies. It was named as “political products” and the products associated with this factor included “political parties” and “charities”. This group associated a product that was among the most offensive considered product among the given list i.e. “Political parties”. This group explained a variance of 4.39% and had an eigen value of 1.24, respectively.

It appeared that the sampled respondents perceive some of the listed products extremely controversial. It appeared that respondents in Punjab were more offended by personal products. These set of products has also been found controversial in other studies that have been conducted in other parts of the world (Fam and Waller, 2003; Fam et al., 2002). The main reason for considering such products most controversial could be that such products may be considered unconventional in the context of Punjab, as the society here is still very conventional and they may not like to openly discuss such products.

The factor followed by it was “social products”. The products loaded in this factor were mostly related to our society. Religion is still considered as one of the most sensitive topic to be discussed and when anything related to religion maybe advertised could cause a greater offence in the audience than any other product. That could be the reason for considering “religious denominations” most controversial in this group. It was followed by “racial extremists groups” and “guns and armaments” which were also considered generating moderate level of controversy and that could be due to the reason that both these products have the capability of causing disharmony in our society. Funeral services was also considered controversial because taking such services may cause shame to the family of deceased one. Punjabi community has strong rooted values that directs them to fulfil their responsibilities properly and taking such services may be considered contradictory to the given beliefs and values.

The third factor obtained here was “addictive products” and “gambling” was considered most controversial product followed by “alcohol” and cigarette”. The reason for considering these products controversial could be that these products are mostly associated

with unemployment and are also considered responsible for creating disharmony in families. Disharmony simply indicates being irresponsible towards homely affairs which on larger level could affect our society.

The fourth obtained factor was “health care products”. The products in this factor were considered least controversial. The ads of “prevention of STD” was though considered most controversial within the group followed by “pharmaceuticals and weight loss programs”. All the products were least considered controversial because they are presented to form a healthy nation.

The additional factor that was created was “political products” and it included ads of “political parties and charities”. Ads of “political parties” was considered as one of the most controversial product and “charities” was among one of the least controversial products. The reason for considering “political parties” controversial could be due to the reason that these ads are considered as one of the least regulated (Tinkham and Larisey-Weaver (1994) and every political party has a different ideology that a person may not find suitable for the society. More importantly, charity has been associated here with political parties that is more of surprising and something that is needed to be think upon.

Bibliography

Dean, Tim (2012) "Evolution and Moral Diversity," *Baltic International Yearbook of Cognition, Logic and Communication*: Vol. 7.

Fam, K. S., Waller D. S., Cyril D. R. E. and He J. (2013). Advertising dislikeability in Asia: Is there a relationship with purchase intention and frequency? *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics* 25(1): 144-161.

Fam, K. S., Waller, D. S. and Erdogan, B. Z. (2002). A cross cultural comparison of attitudes towards the advertising of controversial products. Paper presented at International Advertising Association (IAA) Regional Educational Conference at Sydney, September, 2002.

Fam, K. S., Waller, D. S. and Yang, Z. (2009). Addressing the advertising of controversial products in China: An empirical approach. *Journal of Business Ethics* 88 (1): 43-58.

- Hair, Jr. J. F., Black, W. C., Babin, B. J. and Anderson, R. E. (2010). *Multivariate Data Analysis*. Pearson Education Inc., New Delhi, India.
- Rehman, S. N. and Brooks, J. R. (1987). Attitudes towards television advertisements for controversial products. *Journal of Health Care Marketing* 7: 78–83.
- Shao, A. T. (1993). Restrictions on advertising items that may not be considered ‘decent’: a European viewpoint. *Journal of Euro marketing* 2 (3): 23-43.
- Shao, A. T. and Hill, J. S. (1994a). Global television advertising restrictions: The case of socially sensitive products. *International Journal of Advertising* 13 (4): 347-366.
- Shao, A. T. and Hill, J. S. (1994b). Advertising sensitive products in magazines: legal and social restrictions. *Multinational Business Review* pp. 16-23.
- Tinkham, S. F. and Weaver-Lariscy, R. A. (1994). Ethical Judgments of political television commercials as predictors of attitude toward the HD. *Journal of Advertising* 23 (3): 43-58.
- Waller, D. S. (1999). Attitudes towards offensive advertising: an Australian study. *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 16 (3): 288-295.
- Waller, D. S. (2004). What factors make controversial advertising offensive? A Preliminary Study. Presented at Australian and New Zealand Communication Association International Conference at Sydney (ANZCA04).
- Waller, D. S. and Fam, K. S. (2003). Advertising of offensive products: A challenge for marketing in China. *Asian Journal of Marketing* 9 (1): 38-45.
- Waller, D. S., Fam, K. S. and Erdogan, B. Z. (2005). Advertising of controversial products: a cross-cultural study. *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 22 (1): 6–13.
- Wilson, A. and West, C. (1981). The marketing of unmentionables. *Harvard Business Review* pp. 91–102.