

Factors that influence Youth in Nairobi in their evaluation of controversial advertisements

Irene Ngunjiri, Strathmore University, Nairobi, Kenya

ingunjiri@strathmore.edu

It has been observed that the global trend in marketing is the use of shock advertising in which marketers use nudity, images relating to the instincts and physiological processes or other startling images to get consumers attention. There is an increase in the number of advertisements being broadcast, printed or exposed to the public of products considered by some consumers to be controversial, or socially sensitive, and the portrayal of controversial images in advertisements. This paper examines the factors that are inherent in advertisements that the youth in Nairobi use to judge controversial advertisements. Further it seeks to identify the other factors that make an advertisement offensive or controversial. The findings demonstrate that the youth have different definitions of controversial advertisements and these definitions are influenced by their context.

INTRODUCTION

While many research streams have contributed greatly to current understanding of advertising of controversial products, each has focused on different variables. Severn, Belch and Belch (1990) carried out research to show how the use of socially sensitive appeals in advertising interferes with message comprehension. A preliminary study by Waller (2000), sought to unveil the factors that make controversial advertisements offensive in Australia. A number of studies have also shown that gender differences in perception are common and that women tend to find controversial, embarrassing imagery in advertisements much more offensive than men because typically women are portrayed as being attractive in a socially sensitive way in advertising Ford et al. (2004); La Tour and Henthorne (1993). Prendergast et al. (2002), in their study on Hong Kong's view of offensive advertising suggest that consumers' attitudes towards offensive advertising might vary across countries, cultures and demographic groups. A study by Waller, Fam and Erdogan (2005) to determine attitudes towards the advertising of certain controversial products and services and the reasons for being offensive across Malaysia, New Zealand, Turkey and the UK found that an individual's values contribute to one's expectations of what advertising should entail, depending on the interaction between product type, advertising executions and messages, and media channels.

Little is however known about how the African market perceives and judges controversial advertisements. Researchers have called for further research of the perception of controversial advertisements in different locations Waller et al (2000). This paper addresses this call. It will focus on the factors that are inherent in an advertisement that the youth in Nairobi use to evaluate controversial adverts and the factors that make an advertisement offensive or controversial. It contributes to literature because it attempts to develop deeper insight into the factors that could make an advertisement offensive or controversial and level of offensive in the Kenyan market.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This session presents a review of literature in the area of advertising; more specifically, the factors used to evaluate advertisements.

The Oxford dictionary defines controversy is a dispute, especially a public one, between sides holding opposing views. Some products, simply because of their nature, may be perceived as controversial or the public promotion of them may be seen as offensive by some members of the community Waller (2000).

Advertisements are perceived as being controversial either because of the appeal and manner of presentation or because of the nature of the product that is being advertised. The youth market is viewed as a difficult group to connect with and sell to, based on the fragmented [media landscape](#) and young people's keen ability to identify and reject [marketing messages](#) that lack [credibility](#) Kotler and Armstrong (2002).

Scholars have been in accord that as the society becomes more complex, as its members become more aware of the harmful effects of some products and as advertising agencies try to become more creative to "cut through the clutter" to gain awareness, there will be more advertisements which the general public perceive as "offensive" Waller (1999). The offensiveness of an advertisement depends not only on the product/service (i.e. the subject matter), but also on the type of appeal, the cultural context of the consumers and the manner of presentation. Shampoos for example, have been criticized for attempting to create anxiety and using fear of social rejection in order to sell these products Belch and Belch (1998). Waller (2003) notes that most of the research has observed "controversial advertising" as a negative concept, and if controversial advertising resulted in only negative responses advertisers would shy away from this type of campaign. However, advertisers are not shying away but using it in increasing numbers. The use of controversial images has been successful for a number of organizations in the past (for example, Evans and Sumandeeep (1993); Hornery (1996); Waller (1999); Irvine (2000); McIntyre (2000); Phau and Prendergast (2001). This is particularly important when the reason for controversy is based on the nature of the product Waller (2004).

Factors used to evaluate an advertisement

Nwachukwu L. et al (1997) carried out a research is to examine the ethical judgments of advertising and marketing practitioners. Their research unveiled three critical variables that affect the evaluation of an advert: individual autonomy, consumer sovereignty, and the nature of the product. Their findings show that respondents generally rated ads targeted at individuals who are not autonomous (mature) as less ethical than ads targeted at those who are perceived as autonomous. Similarly, ads targeted at those with low sovereignty were perceived as less ethical than ads aimed at consumers perceived to have high sovereignty. Finally, ads for harmful products were perceived to be less ethical than ads for non-harmful products. They concluded that all three variables play a significant role in terms of the ethical judgments of advertisements. Wells et al. (2006) define these concepts of advertising as the key elements of advertising and they include:

Creative Media Used

Media use is based on the decision on how to deliver the message of the advertisement. Mostly, these are communication channels which reach a broad audience such as television, magazines and the internet, (Wells et al. 2006). More and more advertisers are orchestrating a closer harmony between their messages and the media that deliver them. This is due to media fragmentation, soaring media costs, and the use of more focused target marketing strategies, (Kotler and Armstrong, 2002). Jae H. et al (2002) contend that the media source affects consumers' perceptions of the ad in several ways. First, a media context that is similar to the ad in mood or affect enhances learning and evaluations of the ad and its message. The ad context makes a certain mood or affect more accessible and relieves the processing of stimuli with similar moods or affects. Second, the media source can influence perceptions of the advertised brand for example a magazine's high prestige "rubbed off" on the advertised brand. The medium and the advertised brand converge and become more similar in consumers' minds. If the media context is controversial then the ad may be viewed as controversial.

Creative Idea (message)

Wells et al. (2006) define a creative idea as the advertisement's central idea that catches consumers' attention and sticks into their memory. Kotler and Armstrong (2002) added that this big idea is what brings the message strategy to life in a distinctive and memorable way. The creative concept may thus

emerge as visualization, a phrase or a combination of the two. This creative idea as well guides the choice of specific appeals to be used in the advertising campaigns. The advertising appeal is the underlying idea that captures the attention of a message receiver. Appeals can fall into 2 categories emotional and rational. Rational appeals are directed at the consumers' practical, functional need for a product or service; Emotional appeals at the psychological, social and symbolic needs Arens and Bovee (1994). The type of appeal used will depend on the market. Chandy Rajesh K. et al (2000) conclude that rational appeals, expert sources, and negatively framed messages are particularly effective in new markets while emotion-based appeals and positively framed messages are more effective in older markets. The appeal chosen could have an impact on whether the advertisement is viewed as controversial or not.

Creative Execution (manner of presentation)

Creative execution refers to the details, the photography, the writing, the acting, the setting, the printing and the way the product is depicted in an advertisement (Wells et al. 2006). For Kotler (2005) however, creative execution should capture the target market's attention and interest. Consumers generally prefer advertisements that are presented in a manner that respects their cultural beliefs, gender, lifestyles and other psychosocial and demographic variables. Consumers are also sensitive about the source of the advertisement i.e. if it is locally or foreign sourced. The source of the advert could be a potential cause of controversy.

The type of product

According to Kotler (2005) a product is anything that can be offered to a market to satisfy a need or a want. Products are broken down into two main categories. Consumer goods bought by the final consumers for personal consumption while industrial goods are bought for further processing or for use in conducting business. Any product whether in consumer or industrial could be categorized as controversial or non controversial. Controversial products according to Waller (1999) are "unmentionables", which he described 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". Katsanis (1994) built on the topic by defining unmentionables as those products/services/concepts considered being offensive, embarrassing, harmful, socially unacceptable or controversial to some significant segment of the population.

The examples presented by Waller (1999) of unmentionables, based on the study of Wilson and West (1989), were: "products" (for personal hygiene, birth control, warfare, and drugs for terminal illness), "services" (for abortion, sterilization, mental illness, funeral directors, and artificial insemination), and "concepts" (for political ideas, palliative care, unconventional sexual practices, racial/religious prejudice and terrorism). The existence or degree of unmentionables for products could vary according to time and place. Apart from changes over time, geographic location also seemed to affect levels of offensiveness. Phau and Prendergast (2001) also found these attitudes to vary according to demographics (in particular gender and education).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was descriptive in nature. A descriptive research or study according to Aaker D et al. (2000) provides data about the population or universe being studied. It describe the "who, what, when, where and how" of a situation, but not what caused it. Therefore, descriptive research is used when the objective is to provide a systematic description that is as factual and accurate as possible. It provides the number of times something occurs, or frequency, lends itself to statistical calculations such as determining the average number of occurrences or central tendencies. This method was found to be appropriate for this study as the study sought to unveil the factors that the youth in Nairobi use to evaluate controversial advertisements.

A total of 173 respondents were sampled (96 students male and 77 non students) both male and female who are capable of making purchasing decisions. Due to time and financial constraints a sample was used. Quota sampling was found to be ideal. Selected Universities and households in the capital city of Kenya, Nairobi, were sampled. Nairobi City was used for the study because it is cosmopolitan. The three residential areas; Madaraka Estate, South C and Hurlingham, were chosen to represent diversity in social classes. The residential areas represent lower middle, upper middle and upper class respectively. These were purposely picked to ensure a representation of different parts of the city. A maximum of one respondent from the same household was allowed to fill in the questionnaire. This was done so as to minimize bias that could have arisen since family members tend to have similar opinions on certain matters.

The rationale for using students' sample in a potential comparison of attitude has advantages because it is accepted that purposive samples, such as with students, are superior than random samples for establishing equivalence, and it controls a source of variation, thus is more likely to isolate any cultural differences if they exist. Further, this kind of sample had already been used in controversial advertising studies by scholars such as Waller (1999). To obtain some measure of attitudes towards potentially controversial advertisements, face-to-face interviews were conducted with using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire had multiple choice and open ended questions. A close evaluation on the usefulness of information in answering the research questions was then done. A content analysis of the open ended questions in the questionnaire was done. Secondly, the data across all respondents was aggregated and finally, patterns were established in order to discover the information contained. For the multiple questions plain frequencies by tallying and the number or percentage of respondents who chose each alternative answer were reported.

The objectives of the study were to identify factors that are inherent in advertisements that the youth in Nairobi use to judge controversial advertisements and to establish factors that make advertisements offensive or controversial.

Profile of Respondents

The response rate was 86% with a non-response rate of 14%. This response rate was considered sufficient for a comprehensive data analysis.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

Respondents' Profile		Students N =96	Non students N =77
Gender	Male	27	22
	Female	69	55
Age	Mean age	21 years	27 years
Net monthly income	Mean Income	Ksh. 5000	Ksh. 25001
Location	Madaraka Estate		30
	South C		25
	Hurlingham		22
University	Strathmore University	30	
	Nairobi University	36	
	Catholic University	30	

Source: Research Data (2008)

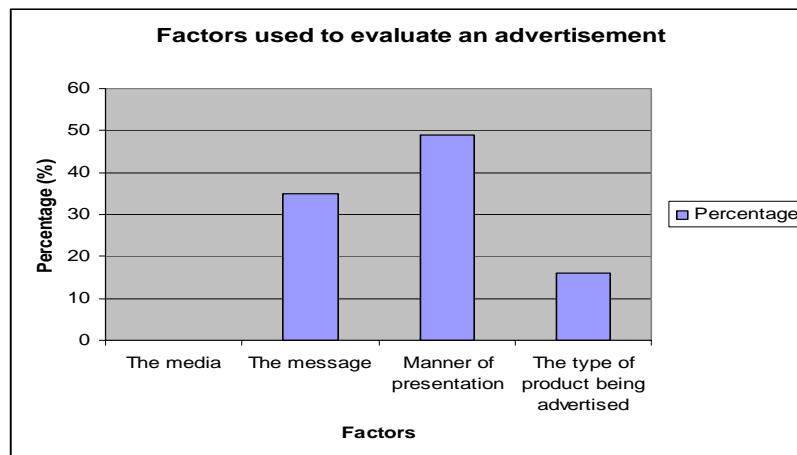
Findings and Discussions

This section discusses the factors that the youth in Nairobi use to evaluate advertisements. Second, it explores factors that make an advertisement offensive or controversial.

Factors used to evaluate an advertisement

Four factors obtained from the literature were presented and respondents were asked to indicate which among the four influence their evaluation of advertisements the most. These factors were: the type of product being advertised, the manner of presentation, the message of the advert and the media channel used for advertising. The majority (49%), considered the manner of adverts presentation as being the key factor in evaluation of an advert. None of the respondents (0%) viewed the type of the media used as being such a factor. This generally implies that the contents of adverts are an important factor in the evaluation of an advert. Figure 1 below presents the findings.

Fig 1: The factors that are used to evaluate an advertisement



Source: Research Data (2008)

Factors Which Make Advertisements offensive

A list of probable factors that could make an advertisement controversial or offensive, obtained from a past study, was availed and respondents were asked to indicate their opinion on what makes an advert controversial or offensive. The majority (47%), considered the use of nudity in advertisements as being the most probable factor that could make an advert indecent. The minority (2%), noted that the mention of terrorism as being an equivalent important determinant. These findings seem to imply that the element of terrorism and individualism is not deeply rooted amongst Kenyans. For more details, see table 2.

Table 2: Controversial Advertisements

	Findings	
	No. Respondents	of Percentage
Racist comments	16	9
A subject too personal	10	6
The mention of terrorism	2	1
Cultural insensitive contents	15	9
Indecent language use	42	24
Use of nudity	46	27
Immoral connotations	42	24
TOTAL	173	100

Source: Research Data (2008)

The results show that the youth in Nairobi term controversial advertising as any advert, which promotes wrong moral values, uses suggestive or abusive language, immoral connotations, and moral degrading icons and portrays nudity. This implies that the contents and manner of presentation have high stake in determining the offensiveness of an advertisement. This is contrary to other countries such as Malaysia, New Zealand, Turkey and the UK where Waller, Fam and Erdogan (2000) found out that potential controversial adverts are more acceptable when they are advertised in the right media. For them, whenever there is a need for a controversial advert, the choice of words and media will be of outmost importance. However from their research, an advert of a product that is perceived as controversial is not necessarily deemed controversial.

In Kenya, controversial adverts are those, which are developed from sexual and moral appeals. This could be due to the fact that morality is a quality that was highly valued by all traditional cultures in Kenya. Indeed, moral values formed the bedrock of the education that was given to children as they grow up. Moral values are impressed on people at various stages in life and this has an impact on their perception of things around them. This is in contrast with Paushali and Lassi (2004) who concluded that using sex appeals might not always have negative effects, although it was advisable not to take it to any extreme. Their study revealed that consumers seemed more inclined to creative and clever use of sexual appeals that are not explicit or suggestive. In Kenya and most African states such appeals may not be acceptable as consumers think that they are copying the western culture and touching on topics that culturally are taboo.

Unlike in Waller, Erdogan and Fam's (2005) study where terrorism was a key source of controversial adverts, the mention of terrorism in adverts is hardly considered offensive in Kenya. The difference in what people perceive as offensive clearly comes out in this study. As a matter of fact, studies by Waller, Fam, Erdogan (2005) and Lassi and Hart (2004) cannot be applied directly to the Kenyan market. What was perceived as being controversial in their areas of study (Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Turkey, Germany, Italy and the UK) seems to be totally opposed in Kenya. Kenyans have a low tolerance for indecent content. This could be due to the cultural values that Kenyans adhere to.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings indicate that as long as the general public can identify with the advertisements, then they are favorable. This makes it imperative for companies embarking on an expansion strategy either nationally or internationally to carry out a thorough analysis to determine who may be offended by their advertising

campaign and the reasons for the offense. Multinational companies that want to venture into the African market must redesign their marketing strategy so as to suit their target market. The same would apply to any African business that would like to venture outside the continent. Waller (2004) notes that marketers of controversial products have a social responsibility not to offend people by their advertising messages even within a free market.

Waller (2000) asserts that although some campaigns aim at being controversial, care should be made to ensure that they are not racist, sexist, do not contain anti-social behavior or indecent language; particularly when targeting the female market. Advertising is a powerful tool for business growth and development. To get the maximum benefits entrepreneurs and organization must carefully think about the target audience and the reactions that an advertisement is likely to elicit.

Further research should be undertaken into attitudes towards controversial products and advertising and their impact on purchasing decisions. It may also be of interest to study the influence of demographic and psychographic factors on the perception of controversial adverts and products. It might be interesting to survey the influence of youth subcultures on their perception of advertisements. It is important for them to develop creative or use more creative media strategies that match the cultural context of the target market to the advertising message. The aim of any advertising campaign is to cause a favorable reaction in the market and induce customers to buy. Therefore the marketer must put all the means in place to ensure that he does not offend customers and the public at large

REFERENCES

- Aaker, D et al (2000), Marketing research, McGraw-Hill Irwin, New York
- Belch. E and Belch .E, 2001, (ed.) Advertising and Promotion: in an integrated communication perspective, McGraw hill, New York
- Barnes, J.H. Jr and Dotson, M.J. (1990), "An exploratory Investigation into the nature of offensive television Advertising", *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 19 no. 3, pp. 61-9.
- Bartos, R. (1981) "Ads That Irritate May Erode Trust In Advertised Brands." *Harvard Business Review*, July–August, pp. 138–139.
- Belch G.E. and Belch, M.A. (1998) Advertising and Promotion. An Integrated Marketing Communications Perspective, McGraw-Hill Irwin, New York
- Belch, M. A., Belch, G.E., Holgerson, B.E. and Jerry, K. (1981) "Psych -physiological and cognitive response to sex in advertising." *Consumer Research*, Vol. 9. pp. 424–427.
- Rajesh K. Chandy et al, (2000), "What to Say When: Advertising Appeals in Evolving Markets" *Journal of Advertising*, 19 (1), 30-39.
- Debicka M. (2000), "Business Students Focus on Ethics" *The International Journal of Practical Philosophy and Methodology*, Vol.8, pp.235-246
- Ford, J.B., La Tour, M.S., and Clarke, I. (2004), "A Prescriptive Essay Concerning Sex Role Portrayals in International Advertising Contexts" *American Business Review*, Vol. 22 (1), pp. 42-55
- Fahy, J., Smart D., Pride W. and Ferrell, O.C. (1995), "Advertising sensitive products", *International Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 14 No. 3, pp. 231-43.
- Ford, J.B., La Tour, M.S., and Lundstrom, W.J. (1991), "Contemporary Women's Evaluations of Female Role Portrayals in Advertising" *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol. 8 (1), pp. 15-28
- Ford, J.B., LaTour, M.S. and Honeycutt Jr, E.D. (1997) "An Examination of the Cross-Cultural Female Response to Offensive Sex Role Portrayals in Advertising." *International Marketing Review* Vol. 14(6), pp. 409–23.
- Henthorne, T.L., LaTour, M.S. and Natarajan, R. (1993) "Fear appeal in print advertising: an analysis of arousal and ad response" *Journal of Advertising* Vol. 22(2), pp. 59–68.
- Henthorne, T. L, and LaTour, M. S. (1995), "A Model To Explore The Ethics of Erotic Stimuli In Print Advertising" *Journal of Business Ethics*. Vol14 (7), pp. 561-569

- Jae H.Pae et al. (2002) "Global Advertising Strategy: The moderating role of Brand Familiarity and the execution style". *International Marketing Review*, Vol 19 pp176-189
- Jensen Keith and Steve Collins "the Third-Person Effect in Controversial Product Advertising" *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 52, No. 2, 225-242 (2008)
- Kamakura, W.A., and Mazzon, J.A. (1991), "Value segmentation: A Model for the Measurement of Values and Value Systems." *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol.18 (2) pp. 208-218
- Katsanis, L.P (1994) "Do Unmentionable Products Still Exist? "An Empirical Investigation" *Journal of Product & Brand Management* Vol. 3(4), pp. 5-14.
- Kotler P., Wong V., Saunders J & Armstrong G., 2005 (ed.) *Principles of marketing*, Prentice hall, Harlow
- LaTour, M.S. (1990) "Female nudity in print advertising: an analysis of gender differences in arousal and ad response" *Psychology and Marketing* Vol. 7(1), pp 44-53.
- La Tour, M. S., and Henthorne, T. L. (1993), "Female nudity: Attitudes toward the ad and the brand, and implications for advertising strategy." *The Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol. 10 (3), pp. 25-32
- Mittal, B., and Lassar, W.M. (2000), "Sexual Liberalism as A Determinant of Consumer Response to Sex in Advertising" *Journal of Business and Psychology*, Vol15 (1), pp. 111-127
- Palmer. A, 2000, *Principles of Marketing*, Oxford University press, New York
- Wells W, Moriarty. S & Burnett J, (Eds.), 2006, *Advertising Principles and Practice*, Pearson Prentice Hall, USA
- Paushali L and Hart S. (2004), "National Cultures, Values and Lifestyles Influencing Consumers' Perception towards Sexual Imagery in Alcohol Advertising: An Exploratory Study in the UK, Germany and Italy" *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 20, pp. 607-623
- Phau, I. and Prendergast, G. (2001) "Offensive Advertising: A View from Singapore." *Journal of Promotion Management* Vol. 7(1), pp1-21
- Rehman, S.N. and Brooks, J.R. (1987), "Attitudes towards Television advertisements for controversial products", *Journal of Health Care Marketing*, Vol. 7 13, September, pp. 78-83.
- Saviour L. S. Nwachukwu et al (1997) "Ethics and Social Responsibility in Marketing: An Examination of the Ethical Evaluation of Advertising Strategies" [Journal of Business Research Volume 39, Issue 2](#), pp 107-118
- Severn, J., Belch, G.E., and Belch, M.A. (1990), "The effects of sexual and nonsexual advertising appeals and information level on cognitive processing and communication effectiveness." *Journal of Advertising* Vol. 19 (1), pp. 14-22
- Shao, A.T. (1993), "Restrictions on Advertising Items That May Not Be Considered 'Decent': A European Viewpoint", *Journal of Euro marketing*, Vol. 2 no. 3, pp 23- 43
- Waller, D.S. (1999), "Attitudes towards offensive advertising: an Australian study", *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol. 16 no. 3, pp. 288-94.
- Waller. D., Fam K., and Erdogan. B, (2005), "Advertising of controversial products: a cross cultural study" *Journal of Consumer Marketing* Vol.22, no.1, pp 6-13
- Waller, D.S. and Fam, K.S. (2000), "Cultural values and advertising in Malaysia: views from the industry", *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, Vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 3-16.
- Wells. W, Moriarty S. and Burnet J (ed.) (2006), *Advertising Principles and Practice*, Pearson Hall, Singapore, 7th edition
- Wilson, A. and West, C. (1981), "The marketing of Unmentionables:" *Harvard Business Review*, pp. 91-102.