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Controversies in Advertising: A Content Analysis

LOIS BROFERMAKER
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Fuyuan Shen
Head, Department of Advertising/Public Relations
Thesis Supervisor and Honors Advisor

Ken Yednock
Assistant Teaching Professor, Department of Advertising/Public Relations
Faculty Reader

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

ABSTRACT

When millions of dollars are on the line, the last thing a company wants to do is pull an ad campaign. Though some companies, such as Benetton, seek to be controversial, not all companies want their brands to be potentially perceived in a negative light. This thesis seeks to investigate the largely unexplored area of controversial advertising and provide insights into common reasons why an advertising campaign would be controversial. Through the aggregation and content analysis of pulled and protested advertising campaigns over the last ten years, and by highlighting notable examples of such, this thesis will show what to avoid if controversy is not the goal, and what kinds of campaigns resulted in controversy.

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Introduction

Advertising is ultimately intended to benefit a brand. Companies use advertising as a way to sway public opinion, generate sales, or put the product at the front of the consumer's mind. As a result, an unintentionally controversial ad campaign can be disastrous for a brand. This thesis will explore the area of controversial advertising using a content analysis of controversial ad campaigns over a ten-year period from 2008 to 2018. This research will unearth common actions made in response to controversial advertisements, show the most affected groups and topics, and reveal the issues that lead to controversy. The aim is to shine a light on what makes advertisements controversial, in order for companies to know how to avoid it and what to do when their ad campaign gets protested.

For some, it is a matter of not doing enough research. Speaking to parties that can potentially take offense to a particular ad campaign can be a great resource for avoiding such controversy. For others, it is carelessness or a simple mistake. The company's reaction to a controversial advertisement is vital to the perception of the brand after an advertisement is pulled or protested. The wrong response can ignite the issue into an even bigger problem for the brand.

Not all controversies are foreseeable. Accidental controversy has the potential to leave companies unprepared for the consequences of the ad campaign. For this reason, it is absolutely crucial to take caution when delving into potentially controversial topics and ensure that any thematic risk is taken with a salient strategy. Accidental controversy is much more difficult to wield as a tool, because the controversy was inherently absent from the strategy of the advertising campaign.

In the next few pages, I will highlight the historical background and general criticisms of advertising as a whole to provide context for the research, then address the research questions that I will seek to answer. Following the discussion of the research questions, I will then describe the research method and discuss the findings and their implications.

Conceptual Background

Advertising has been a contentious topic throughout history. Through surveys across six decades, researchers have consistently found that around 70% of people find advertising to be generally distrustful (Calfee & Ringold, 1994). Advertising is inherently fraught with skepticism, as consumers are aware that they are sponsored messages by the brand itself.

There are numerous common criticisms to the nature of advertising. Advertising is often criticized as promoting a modern era of "consumerism" or "consumer culture", though advertising has been in practice since sellers stamped their goods with their branding in Babylonian times, and later, town-criers of the medieval era sang the praises of local products (Schwarzkopf, 2011). Advertising is nothing new - it has just become more of an exact science as time has gone on. What were once simplistic promotional signs on the walls of establishments in the Roman Empire, eventually became what we see as modern advertising. Today, a message can be delivered instantly to people who fit the exact desired demographic. Advertising agencies pioneered creative briefs and situation analyses. Modern advances in digital advertising allows us to target specific groups of people, and even remarket to them to increase frequency. With the rise of different media to advertise on, such as print, radio, TV, and the Internet, the possibilities of the scope of advertising campaigns on increased. What was once a stab in the dark of general messaging to a general population became carefully planned campaigns that carried out the messaging mission of the brand to a specific audience. Today, it is absolutely necessary to understand consumers attitudes and purchase decisions to enact a successful campaign (O'Guinn et.al, 2019). Another criticism of advertising is its hidden nature. Advertising has become stealthier as the years have gone on, and has even been referred to as "Orwellian" by some

(Packard & Miller, 2017, p. 2). Advertising has been accused of sometimes using manipulative, unnerving or invasive tactics to target a population. An example cited by Packard and Miller's *Hidden Persuaders* was an advertising agency that studied the emotional effects of menstrual cycles to see which messages would be the most effective at different points of their cycles.

Yet another criticism is best summarized by Naomi Klein in her book *No Logo*. Advertising perpetuates brands, which in of themselves can be viewed as problematic (Klein, 1999). Advertising can create desire for products which have no real inherent need. These advertisements have even made their way into schools, which can be problematic for the young, impressionable minds of children.

With this rise of modern advertising procedures, ads have taken risks and sometimes found themselves in controversies. One theory as to the rise of controversies in advertising is that campaigns must "cut through the clutter" to be remembered (Waller, 1999, p. 288). This results in advertising campaigns that may veer in an offensive direction in order to stay relevant in an age where advertising is everywhere. Benetton is a particularly notable example of this, with campaigns that regularly invoke shock or political messaging to sell their fashion brand. While their campaigns may seem at first glance to be controversial for controversy's sake with ads that feature major world leaders locking lips and graphic depictions of human anatomy, the ads are created with great care and consciousness of cultural context (Incze, 2018). Simply put, the advertisements are created to be shocking yet accurate depictions of our current cultural atmosphere, instead of simply being shocking without any real strategy. Benetton's campaigns are controversial yet successful because they featured a philosophy that customers wanted to buy into.

Despite the history of controversies in advertising, no extensive research has been done to systematically examine the nature of controversies of advertising. Much research has been done on industries that are typically controversial, and the attitudes toward controversial campaigns. Controversies can be used as a tool to drive consumer engagement and brand recognition. However, controversies may be disastrous for a brand.

Research questions

Despite a pressing need, no prior research has looked at the causes and consequences of controversial advertising campaigns. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate what constitutes a controversial advertising campaign and what the consequences were. In addition, I will also seek to understand the most common groups affected, the most common types of controversies, and the most common outcomes.

There are many ways of investigating this issue, such as showing a potentially controversial advertisement in a focus group and monitoring responses, or surveying groups to measure a key purchase factor such as brand retention or brand loyalty after viewing an ad. However, I decided to use a content analysis of media coverage in researching this topic. By using a content analysis of advertisements from the past decade, it is more possible to ascertain a greater understanding of the general content of these campaigns. The broad scope of examples included provide a well-rounded view of what has constituted controversial advertising campaigns of the past decade.

It should be noted that this topic is by no means meant as "Public Relations" research. Though we will codify the possible responses to controversy, this thesis is focused on describing

the content, controversies and outcomes; rather than fixing public relations disasters as a result of these ads. The focus is on analyzing what happened, rather than focusing on solutions. However, I will discuss possible ways to prevent producing a controversial advertisement before it is released.

Advertisements not included in research

Some advertisements will be inherently controversial due to the nature of the company associated with it. For this thesis, I have chosen not to include such advertisements with inherent and unavoidable controversy, such as political advertisements. I have also elected to not cover advertising campaigns outside of the United States, or ads run in local markets- unless the advertising campaign in question is covered nationally. The coverage must be nationwide as well, which is why I have elected to use articles from the five US major dailies.

An example of advertising campaigns I have elected not to include in this research are political campaigns that turn controversial. As political advertisements are inherently controversial for the most part, it would be unnecessary to include them. I have also chosen not to include instances of campaigns where the offended party was a competitor. For example, Comcast sued AT&T in 2008 for slander in an ad campaign (Yao, 2008). Because such offense may be manufactured to generate publicity, or involve an inter-business competitive matter, I have also chosen not to include these.

There are numerous examples of advertising campaigns that I have chosen not to include because the nature of their controversy is derived from the product. There are numerous products that are considered "lost causes" in the advertising world that will garner protests no matter the

content of the ad (Matthews, 1997). For that reason, we have not included them, as to not screw

results. For example, tobacco or alcohol products will be inherently controversial due to their

potential danger. However, an exception would be if a protested advertising campaign featured

an illicit substance during a commercial intended for children. Another example of an area of

advertising that will not be covered is medicine. If an advertisement garners controversy purely

because it fails to properly portray the side effects of a certain medication, then it will not be

included in this thesis. However, if an ad campaign for a certain medication is controversial for

reasons outside of the nature of the product, it can be included. In short, campaigns that will be

inherently controversial despite the content of the advertisement will not be counted. The content

of the advertisement itself must be controversial.

In some rare cases, ad campaigns can be retroactively controversial. For example,

Subway ran commercials using a spokesman who was later exposed as a pedophile (Hauser,

2017). The ads were not controversial at the time of their release but became controversial once

this information was released. If the campaign falls within the ten-year time frame, it will be

included in the study and noted as retroactively controversial. In order to be included, either the

advertisement, protest, or coverage must be nationwide. Local advertisements, for the most part,

will not be covered unless the example is especially egregious and covered by a national news

source.

Good Publicity

When discussing the topic of research with others, a common assumption comes up in

regard to the benefit of controversies to companies. The reasoning goes that when an ad

campaign becomes controversial, it will be frequently discussed, thus leading to more publicity which will have a positive effect on the brand. This is the "all publicity is good publicity" line of thinking. Though this thesis is purely meant to expose the most common advertising pitfalls and controversies, I would like to briefly touch on this topic and offer a counter for this reasoning.

To say that all publicity is good publicity completely ignores the fundamentals of brand image and brand integrity. While a controversial advertisement may be beneficial for some brands, and some brands may actively seek to be controversial, not all brands seek to be controversial. A racially insensitive ad may be expected for one brand and may be devastating for others. An edgy, dark brand can get away with much more than the brand of a children's toy company. A company like Walmart or Disney, for instance, will strive to protect their brand image by staying far away from any controversial topics in their advertising campaigns. They aim to be safe and approachable, rather than seemingly insensitive. Showing an unintentional allusion to blackface in a Disney ad would be a PR disaster, and would require an exhaustive effort to rebuild their sanitary brand image. Controversy must deliberately align with audience expectations and attitudes. What matters here is how the target audience responds to values presented in advertising.

For a real life example, a mattress store in 2016 featured a 9/11 sale in their ad, complete with mattresses set up to look like the Twin Towers (Wang, 2016). The backlash was immediate. If all publicity was good publicity, the store would have thrived from the attention. After all, here was a previously unknown store, getting massive nationwide news coverage- the controversy should have boosted their sales and increased their business. However, because not all publicity is good publicity, the store shut down.

That being said, a brand may feature an unintentional controversy, and still be able to bounce back stronger. For instance, Cheerios released an advertising campaign in 2013 that featured an interracial couple. There was a strong, racially charged backlash to the ad, that resulted in the company having to turn off their comments section on the ad. However, Cheerios did not apologize, and was applauded for their efforts (Stump, 2013).

The difference between good and bad controversy is intent and recovery. Research such as what is covered in this paper is intended to give power to brands to choose when then want to be controversial and avoid such controversy if they so choose. However, every situation is unique, and there is no "one size fits all" solution to the problem of controversy in advertising. Some controversies cannot even be foreseeable- for example, when Rachel Ray donned a patterned scarf in a Dunkin' Donuts commercial, no amount of focus groups and market tests could have predicted that a select group of viewers would take offense to the scarf pattern and associate it with Islamic terrorism.

Controversy is not an inherent good. It is a tool, to be used with caution and intent. Though some brands have been able to utilize their controversy for the good of the brand, not all can or should. This thesis seeks to give agency to companies on whether or not they would like to feature controversy as a strategy. By shedding a light on what makes advertisements controversial, a brand may choose to tread more carefully around certain topics covered by this thesis.

METHOD

Sample.

In order to analyze controversial advertisements over the last ten years, I chose to do a content analysis using newspaper coverage. Articles dated between January 1st, 2008 and December 31st, 2017 were eligible for inclusion within the content analysis. This particular date range was chosen because research began before the end of 2018, and it was decided that it would be advantageous to include a range of time that would not necessitate retroactive additions of new controversies. I first compiled articles from the five US major dailies, including The *New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, and the Wall Street Journal*. For a more in depth look at individual campaigns, I gathered information from *Adage* and *Adweek* as well. For the purposes of this thesis, broadcast news sources have not been used. Only written news articles were included in the thesis. In order to find articles, I have used combinations of the keywords such as advertising, advertising campaigns, and controversial, controversy, protested, pulled, activist, and negative.

In addition to these keywords, I added a date constraint to the search term, in order to only show results from the past ten years, to ensure that all examples fit within the timeline constraint previously outlined.

I then strove to select as many articles as I could find that covered the controversies of that specific year, within the constraints of the conditions I posed earlier. The goal was to have a comprehensive amount of samples to include in the research, to accurately reflect the state of controversial advertising during this given time period. From there, I took every article and coded them, and entered the codings into a spreadsheet, which I later turned into usable data.

Content in the spreadsheet included the year of the article publication, brand or company name, advertising format, nature of the controversy, offended party, and end result. This will allow us to see what groups most commonly protest advertising, the types of companies most frequently involved, and the most common end results. We will also be able to see what methods best assuaged controversy.

Because I will be pulling a roughly consistent number of articles per year, it will not be possible to parse fluxes in the number of controversies per year. However, I will note when years seem particularly abundant or slim, when the need arises.

Every advertisement was collected into an Excel spreadsheet. The columns of the spreadsheet included the name of the brand, the year, the name of the publication the information was pulled from, the group affected, the platform (such as TV, radio, print, etc.), stakeholders/agencies involved, a rough overview of the cause of the controversy, reactions, and outcomes. If the advertising campaign was a Super Bowl ad, this was noted in the "platforms" column.

A total of 89 advertising campaigns were selected over the past decade, then compiled into a spreadsheet. I was unable to find more than 89 examples within the past decade that fit within our specific constraints. The examples were then coded according to coding procedures outlined in the next section.

Coding Procedures

In order to code the advertising campaign examples contained within the spreadsheet, I identified three main areas to code. "Nature of the Controversy" sought to identify the specific type of controversy explored in the paper. For example, this coding category indicated if a controversy was racially motivated or pertained to social values. "Controversy cause" outlined what "went wrong" with the advertisement. This could include imagery, copy, messaging, etc. The last category was for the outcome of the controversy. This category sought to code what resulted from the campaign. Please note that for this particular category, many examples had multiple codings. For example, an ad could have been removed and an apology issued. These three categories contained a total of twenty-five coding categories.

Because many ads could have fallen into multiple categories, great care has been taken to construct specific categories, and code them into multiple categories when necessary. No ads from the "Nature of the Controversy" category were lumped into multiple categories, however. To encompass all coding categories that only contained one example or fewer, an "other" category was constructed as a catchall.

Due to the number of coding categories, a comprehensive coding sheet has been included. This coding sheet defines all terms much more thoroughly to evade potential confusion.

Coding Strategy

I first coded three categories for every example. Each category then received a code. A few categories were then coded for ease of analysis. A coding guide is as follows, the results of which can be found in Tables 1, 2 and 3.

Coding categories for nature of controversies

- **Racial:** Any advertisement that is controversial as a result of racial issues is placed into this category. This includes, but is not limited to, racism, blackface, racial discrimination and racial stereotypes.

- **Disturbing:** This coding category includes any advertisement that is regarded as shocking, disgusting, frightening or otherwise disconcerting to the viewer. Covers examples previously coded as "extremism" as well.

- **Women's Issues:** This covers miscellaneous women's issues such as sexism against women or a sexist ideology presented within the ad. This category does not include objectification.

- **Social Values:** This category covers controversies that pertain to what is considered societally or widely acceptable such as human rights or acceptable social interaction. This does not pertain to social values of today or of the general population, but rather, the social values of the offended group.

- **Political:** Though political campaigns were not included in the research, some campaigns became controversial because despite being an apolitical brand, their campaign took a clear political stance.

- **Objectification:** This category indicates that sexual objectification was the source of the controversy. This includes needlessly sexualized models and ideas.

- **LGBT:** This signifies that the affected group was part of or related to the LGBT community.

- **Other Messaging:** Includes exploitative and misleading messaging.

- **Other Groups:** Includes disabled persons, anti-Semitism, Parents and fringe groups. This category largely includes groups either difficult to categorize or with too few examples to constitute their own category.

Coding categories for cause of the controversies

The next set of categories focus on the root cause of the controversy, which corresponds to Table 2.

- **Social Issues:** Ad was found to be misaligned with the social values of the offended group or population, or addressed sensitive social issues.

- **Insensitive Message:** Messaging was deemed to be the root of the issue.

- **Insensitive Copy:** Copy was deemed to be the root of the issue. This is separate from "Insensitive Message", because this category refers to text, while messaging refers to themes.

- **Inappropriate:** An advertisement labeled as "inappropriate" is deemed to be improper, crass or overly rude. This category usually depends on the particular company or product, as an otherwise innocent brand may garner controversy when needlessly inappropriate.

- **Misleading**: A controversy is coded as misleading when it is controversial because it contains factually incorrect statements, misinformation or essential missing information that may mislead the audience.

- **Imagery:** The controversy contains imagery that can be considered offensive.

- **Stereotypes:** The controversy contains offensive and recognizable stereotypes.

- **Spokesperson:** When spokesperson is used as a code, it means that the "face" in the advertisement is the source of the controversial. Oftentimes, this category is retroactively controversial, as spokespeople may misstep and make an otherwise unassuming advertising campaign into a hot button issue.

- **Other:** This category is a catch-all for controversies difficult to qualify.

Coding categories for the outcome of the controversies

The following coding categories deal with the possible outcomes of the controversy, which corresponds to Table 3. Multiple codings can be used for one controversy.

- **Removed:** This category indicates that the ad was removed by the creator.

- **Changed:** This indicates that the ad was modified as a direct result of the controversy.

- **Defended:** This indicates that a party involved in the creation of the given advertising campaign has issued a defense for the ad.

- **Apologized:** This category indicates that an official apology was released in response to the backlash against the advertising campaign.

- **No response:** In this instance, an official response was either not given or not found. Parties involved in a controversial campaign may choose to ignore that a controversy occurred.

- **Banned:** The advertising campaign's outcome is coded as "banned" when the host, provider, government, or network removes the ad. For example, if a TV station pulls an

ad from airing again, or bans the brand or agency behind the ad from advertising with

them in the future, the ad is considered banned.

- **Legal Actions by Groups:** This coding category is used in the rare situation when legal

 action is taken against a brand as a direct result of the controversy.

RESULTS

Nature of the Controversy

In order to investigate the research questions outlined by this thesis, the nature of the

controversial advertisement was first examined, as seen in Table 1. "Social values" was the most

common controversy type, with 24.09% of cases in this category. A significant example of this

came from Miracle Whip in 2011, with an ad campaign that promised to fund the wedding or

divorce of one lucky couple (Shayon, 2011). Social values commonly covered ads that slighted

conservatives or parents, or dealt with national tragedies.

Next was "racial issues", with 18%. An example of an ad that falls under this category is

a 2011 Nivea ad that implied that black men with Afros were uncivilized. The ad depicted a

black man ready to throw the severed head of a dark-skinned man with an Afro, with copy that

read "re-civilize yourself" (Nudd, 2011). The racial issues category most commonly included

controversies that dealt with risky depictions of African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and

Muslims.

"Objectification" took a close third, with 16.87%. These ads featured needlessly or

hyper-sexualized models, often taking the form of scantily clad women. An example of an

objectifying campaign would be a 2015 Carl's Jr ad that sparked the hashtag "#WomenAreMoreThanMeat" because of the use of a hyper-sexualized model to sell hamburgers (Davis, 2015). Activists took issue with the usage of a sexualized women to sell something that had nothing to do with sex.

Apart from the controversies contained within "other groups" or "other messaging", "LGBT" was the least common controversy, with 3.61%. Many LGBT focused ads had to do with HIV issues. For example, one ad issued by the Illinois Department of Public Health targeted gay men, with ad copy that said "He's the one… that could infect you." Gay rights activists took umbrage with the connection between STDs and HIV with gay dating (Trice, 2010).

Table 1. Nature of the Controversy

Nature of Controversy	Frequency	Percent
Racial Issues	15	18%
Disturbing	8	9.63%
Women's Issues	9	10.84%
Social Values	20	24.09%
Political	6	7.22%
Objectification	14	16.87%
LGBT	3	3.61%
Other Groups	4	4.82%
Other Messaging	4	4.82%

Note: Frequency is the number of occurrences, percent is frequency divided by the total.

Causes of the Controversy

As for the content of the controversy, we found that "insensitive copy" was the most common cause coded, with 26.19% of the coding for this category falling into this particular group. The insensitive copy category was not dominated by a single nature of the controversy, but quite a few fell under the category of "social values". The majority of ads that fell under insensitive copy were removed and/or apologized for. "Imagery" was the second most common root cause, with 21.43%. A great example of the imagery category is the controversy of Rachael Ray's scarf in a Dunkin' Donuts commercial, which resembled a Muslim headscarf called a Kaffiyeh (Bryson & York, 2008). The ad's resemblance to the headscarf was unintentional, but backlash from conservative groups over the imagery came quickly. However, the majority of the ads within the imagery category garnered controversy because they featured objectification of women.

There were only 2 ads that garnered controversy as a result of an ill-chosen spokesman, and both exemplify two ways an ad with a spokesperson can become controversial. A notable example of this was Nike's partnership with Oscar Pistorius, the South African runner who went

on to murder his girlfriend (Stampler, 2013). The controversy was not immediate, as the runner had not committed the act until after the ads aired. The firestorm surrounding the ad was only fueled by the fact that Pistorius referred to himself as "the bullet in the chamber" during the spot. The spokesman's arrest, paired with the unfortunately apt copy of the ad, made for an eventual controversy. The other controversy involving a spokesperson during the studied time frame was a "Focus on the Family" Super Bowl ad featuring Tim Tebow (Foust, 2010). In contrast with the Nike ad, the controversy occurred before the ad ever aired. Pro-Choice activist groups protested the ad, suspecting that the conservative football star would use the ad to further a Pro-Life message. Despite the protests, the company behind the ad decided to run it anyway. The two ads exemplify two different forms of controversy- one a complete accident, the other as a result of a deliberate choice.

There were nine ads that fell under "Insensitive Messaging", or 10.71%. One notable ad with insensitive messaging was an email campaign sent out by Adidas in 2017, which contained the headline "Congratulations, you survived the Boston Marathon". The audience drew parallels between the message and the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013 (Calfas, 2017). Adidas promptly apologized after the email campaign was protested heavily on social media.

There was only one advertisement that fell into the "other" category, one that angered collegiate athletes for depicting chess players as athletes (Feloni, 2013). Student athletes complained about the billboard set up by Webster University, citing favoritism of chess players over their sports with the advertisement, but the university did not back down, and defended the ad.

Table 2: Causes of the Controversy

Content	Frequency	Percent
Social Issues	15	17.86%
Insensitive Message	9	10.71%
Insensitive Copy	22	26.19%
Inappropriate	6	7.14%
Misleading	5	5.95%
Imagery	18	21.43%
Stereotypes	6	7.14%
Spokesperson	2	2.38%
Other	1	1.19%

Note: Frequency is the number of occurrences, percent is frequency divided by the total.

Outcomes

The last category, as shown in Table 3, refers to the outcome of the controversy. Because multiple codings can be used for one example in this category, the focus will be on the number of instances, rather than the percentage. Ads were most commonly removed, with 26 instances of removal.

There were 25 instances of defending the ad, and 24 instances of apologies. Surprisingly, in some cases, the creators behind the ad both defended and apologized. For some, this was a result of an initial defense, and after pressure, a formal apology. For others, the company apologized, while the agency defended it. For example, a 2008 Billboard from Nike was swiftly removed after LGBT activists called the ad insensitive. While Nike issued an apology, the agency behind the ad issued a statement that called the activists "hyper-sensitive" (Casey, 2008). While this conflict between agency and brand is not common, it shows that it is important to

distinguish between the reactions or opinions of all entities behind the creation of an ad campaign, because they are not always homogenous.

Most commonly, when an apology is issued as a result of a controversial ad campaign, a message will be released on social media. In some instances, this has taken the form of an additional promise to donate to charity, such as the apology issued by Groupon after their 2011 advertisement that was criticized for the way they addressed Tibetan issues (Wang, 2011). Groupon issued an apology and promised to match donations for up to $100,000 for three charities to make up for the misstep.

Least commonly occurring was "legal action", with only one case involving the law. PETA ran a controversial Anti-Sea World campaign, which was removed after its placement in the San Diego International Airport. PETA then pursued legal action against the airport (LA Times, 2014).

In some cases, it is difficult to determine whether an ad was actually removed due to the platform the ad was placed on. For example, controversial newspaper or magazine ads may not explicitly be removed, but rather, not appear in future publications. This makes it nearly impossible to decide in some cases whether an ad campaign was quietly removed from future publications or only meant to run once in the first place.

Table 3: Outcomes of Controversial Campaigns

Campaign Outcomes	Frequency	Percent
Ads Removed	26	24.76%

Ads Changed	3	2.86%
Campaign Defended	25	23.8%
No response given	23	21.9%
Party Apologized	24	22.86%
Ads Banned	3	2.86%
Legal actions by groups	1	0.95%

Note: Frequency is the number of occurrences, percent is frequency divided by the total.

The Case of Burger King

There is one surprising name that has shown up a record number of times during the course of research for this paper. Burger King has consistently found ways to push the envelope over the decade investigated. Partnered with the advertising agency Crispin Porter + Bogusky, the brand produced many contentious ads over the years investigated. The two companies eventually split in 2011 with a joint statement, ending a partnership of seven years (Parekh & Morrison, 2011). I decided to pull out this particular company as an example of consistently

controversial advertising because of the sheer number of times they featured, and to explain why Burger King found themselves in hot water so consistently.

In line with Waller's theory (1999) discussed earlier, Burger King wanted to "push through the clutter" and take risks. Crispin Porter + Bogusky, being considered an agency in touch with current trends with a focus on viral marketing and generally unafraid to make bold moves, was the perfect agency for the job. The agency deliberately focuses on cultural conflict, and seeks to address this conflict through advertising, hence why Crispin Porter + Bogusky sometimes find their ads in hot water. Together, they made numerous campaigns with huge risks. Some of these risks paid off, others, did not. While the ads did garner attention as intended, some were downright offensive. One particular ad campaign in 2008 featured traveling to isolated nations to make so called "Whopper Virgins" try a Whopper for the first time (York, 2008). Critics cited the ad as "exploitative" of indigenous or isolated nations. Another controversial campaign prompted users to delete ten friends off their Facebook, then sent the deleted friends a message that they'd been sacrificed for a Burger King coupon (McCarthy, 2009).

Burger King is a great example of the difference between intending controversy and taking risks. Though they did not intend to be controversial, their risk taking made them more prone to controversies. Despite of, or perhaps because of, the great risks and controversies behind their partnership, Crispin Porter + Bogusky won numerous awards for creativity during the course of those seven years. Though not all publicity is good publicity as discussed earlier, Burger King was able to utilize their accidental controversies to their advantage, and brand themselves as risk-takers.

Conclusions and Discussions

Controversy does not exist in a vacuum. It is often the product of a disconnect between the audience and the messaging. Controversy may be thought of as a "cultural conflict." Many ads included in the list were controversial among groups that it was not intended for. For example, Tim Tebow's "Focus on the Family" ad was not meant for a Pro-Life audience, and thus, did not suffer as a result of the controversy. However, if an ad is controversial among the general population, or is controversial among the intended audience, this is where problems begin to occur. The "hip-hop" blackface cupcakes in the Duncan Hines commercial signaled a disconnect between the ad and what the customer viewed as acceptable. As a result, Duncan Hines found itself in hot water and removed the ad.

The purpose of this thesis is to find out the causes of controversial campaigns and the issues involved. I sought to investigate the common causes of controversy and the outcomes of such. To do so, I did a content analysis of media coverage of controversial advertising campaigns from the last ten years, from 2008 to 2017.

This research found that most advertising campaigns became controversial as a result of handling race in a risky or offensive way or offending a group's perceived social values. Another common controversy involved women or the objectification of them. Much care must be taken when creating an advertising campaign that involves race, women, or the values of the audience, as to avoid unnecessary controversy.

The majority of controversies took the form of insensitive copy and imagery. This means that the majority of controversies were more explicitly about the content of the advertising, rather than vague themes or topics that were controversial. Consumers mostly responded to or

protested advertisements that came with controversial writing or imagery. As a result, it is a good practice to involve potentially offended groups before releasing advertising with contentious imagery or copy. This can take the form of a focus group or test audience to ensure that potentially risky ads are cleared by the group that would be most affected by them.

The majority of the ads examined in this research were ultimately either removed, defended, apologized for, or no response was given. It is far more likely that an ad will be removed by the company behind it than banned from airing. A company faced with a controversy may choose to employ several combinations of these tactics. They may apologize for the ad and remove it, or defend the ad and remove it. It is less likely for a company to change an ad. It is often hard to tell if an ad without any associated official response was removed or allowed to run, but most often, these controversial ads are removed as soon as controversy hits.

Although this thesis has provided some interesting findings, it does come with certain limitations. The limited time frame means a limited view of controversies over the years. It is hard to have a proper grasp on how controversies have changed over the years with a sample size of only one decade. In addition, the decision to only include campaigns from America means that a more global perspective cannot be ascertained.

Another limitation is the descriptive nature of the paper. As discussed in the introductory section of the thesis, this is by no means public relations research. As a result, I was not able to address what a company should do once their already active advertising campaign becomes controversial. Because I only sought to describe what happened, I was not able to offer much discussion or research contained in this thesis about what should be done in the future.

A third constraint of the research behind this thesis is of the difficulty in gathering information, given the nature of this research. When an advertisement becomes contentious, a

company may choose to attempt to erase as much evidence of the ad as possible. An example of this practice can be quietly pulling the advertisement, or even going as far as to request that news sites remove their coverage of the campaign. Because of this behavior, I may not have been able to find all examples of controversies throughout the years. Another common tactic is silence. Many of the campaigns included in the coding category "no response" in the outcome section of the content analysis were coded in that manner because the company behind them chose to pretend that the advertisement never existed. However, some of the campaigns were coded as "no response" because of a lack of information. It is entirely possible that such campaigns did originally have a response, but said response was removed.

I originally wanted to identify the advertising agencies or in-house producers of the advertisements included in the research. However, parties associated with such ads may not want to put their name on something that has generated so much controversy. As a result, it was typically difficult or impossible to find the original creators behind the ads.

The last constraint relates to the nature of this thesis as a content analysis. Firstly, not everything can be neatly coded into a category. I have attempted to circumvent this by including coding categories designated as "other". However, there are instances of advertising campaigns that toe the line of what can be included in the thesis. For example, a campaign released prior to the time frame that later becomes controversial during the course of our investigated time frame is evaluated on a case by case basis of whether they should be included. Some fringe group categories, such as chess players, are difficult to ascribe to a singular category. Because this is a content analysis, a more comprehensive dive into the nature of each and every example cannot be achieved. Though I have pulled out a few notable examples of campaigns, I have not been able to write in depth about every single advertisement that has been included in the thesis.

Because I chose to utilize media coverage, there is another inherent limitation. The bulk of the media coverage may have occurred at the start of the controversy, and may be missing information such as the company response or outcome due to the time of publication. This means that information contained within these sources may be incomplete. This does not mean that the information is inherently inaccurate, as the news sources utilized are all credible national news sources, however.

As result, this thesis can in no way be considered exhaustive. More research must be done if a more complete view of the controversies of ad campaigns over the years is desired. However, this does not mean that the research included in this thesis is not valuable. If one wishes to know the most commonly targeted groups in recent years, this paper can act as a resource.

Controversy must ultimately be used as a tool, wielded with care and precision. Proper usage of controversial tactics comes with an understanding of the audience and their values. If a severe disconnect between the target of the ad and the messaging occurs, the ad will not be effective in reaching the consumer. This is entirely dependent on the audience's expectations of the brand and the beliefs of the audience. Care must be taken to ensure that accidental controversy does not occur.

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ACADEMIC VITA

LOIS BROFERMAKER

CERTIFICATIONS:

EDUCATION:

Pennsylvania State University Class of 2019, Schreyer Honors College and Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications
Major: Advertising
Minors: Digital Media Trends and Analytics, German

WORK EXPERIENCE:

SAATCHI & SAATCHI X
Shopper Strategy Agency in Fayetteville, Arkansas - Digital Production Intern - Summer 2018
- Created digital advertisement mockups for Proctor & Gamble for Walmart and Sam's Club
- Maintained Proctor & Gamble's digital rebate offers on Walmart.com
- Created social media for Saatchi&Saatchi X's official charity, The CARE Initiative
- Ran Facebook ad campaigns
- Audited Walmart.com to ensure images aligned with brand standards
- Met with Digital Advertising vendors

COMMAGENCY
Penn State's Communications Agency in State College, PA - Fall 2018 to Spring 2019
- Shot and edited a recruitment commercial for the Bellisario College of Communications
- Served on the Social Media board and curated posts

PENN STATE STUDENT PROGRAMMING ASSOCIATION
Student Organization in State College, PA - Head of Creative Marketing - 2017 to 2018
- Ran meetings and delegated tasks to market events on campus
- Created promotional materials and designed posters using Adobe Photoshop
- Managed a marketing budget of over $40,000
- Helped plan and execute large scale events

NYTIX
Broadway News Website in NYC - Marketing Intern - Summer 2017
- Wrote original news articles
- Improved the Search Engine Optimization of website pages
- Created art for articles and resized assets
- Fixed faulty HTML using Dreamweaver

WRCR 1700AM
Radio Station in Pomona, NY - Intern - 2014 to 2015
- Created radio advertisements and gathered sponsors
- Ran a midweek radio show