

CONTROVERSIAL ADVERT PERCEPTIONS IN SNS ADVERTISING: THE ROLE OF ETHICAL JUDGEMENT AND RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT

Abstract:

This study attempts to advance knowledge in the area of controversial advertising by examining the antecedents and consequences of controversial advert perceptions in the context of social media, and particularly social networking sites (SNS). Specifically, we explore how ethical judgement and religious commitment shape controversial advert perceptions leading to attitudes towards the advert, brand attitudes and purchase intentions. Our results indicate that when a SNS advert is judged to be ethically acceptable, the level of perceived advert controversy is lower. However, the impact of ethical judgement on controversial advert perceptions becomes significant and positive when intra-personal commitment and inter-personal religious commitment are introduced as moderators. This result implies that the level of religious commitment changes the ethical judgement - controversial advert perceptions relationship. The results also highlight that controversial advert perceptions negatively influence attitude toward the advert. The study contributes to the limited knowledge on controversial advertising on SNS, yielding significant and relevant implications for academics and advertisers alike, in their effort to improve advertising effectiveness without offending or alienating target audiences.

Keywords: Controversial advert perceptions; Ethical judgement; Religious commitment; Social networking sites.

1. Introduction

An issue faced by many advertisers and marketers in both traditional and online media settings (Rotfeld, 2006) is dealing with advertising clutter, which leads to consumers' exercising selective attention (Pilotta and Schultz, 2005; Nimeh, 2007) and avoiding advertising (Ha and McCann, 2006; Elliott and Speck, 1998; Brajnik and Gabrielli, 2010). In order to 'cut through the clutter', advertisers often use controversial advertising involving sexual images, racism, war, child abuse, or minorities (Prendergast, Ho and Phau, 2002; Vezina and Paul, 1997; Waller, 2006; Fam et al., 2008). Controversial advertising is defined as using "*provocative images, words or situations that utilise or refer to taboo subjects or that violate societal norms or values*" (Huhmann and Mott-Stenerson, 2008, p. 294). Controversial advertising can also include the advertising of 'taboo' or offensive products, such as cigarettes, alcohol or condoms (Phau and Prendergast, 2001; Waller, 2004). The debate over the merits of controversial advertising is still open and even though controversial advert campaigns are infrequently successful and most often cause negative associations with the brand (Berger, 2001), such adverts are still largely used by advertisers for varied products and services (e.g., Pope, Voges and Brown, 2004; Waller, 2006). For example, one facet of controversial advertising that has been utilised by far the most, and which has led to complaints, is that of sexual images (Waller, 2006).

Furthermore, previous research suggests that the level of offense a consumer experiences from an advert depends on various contextual factors, which are internal and external to consumers (Belch, Belch and Guolla, 2011); including the media platform on which the controversial advertising is placed, as well as individual factors, such as ethical judgement and religious commitment. With regards to external factors, digital media platforms differ greatly from their traditional counterparts, since audiences have been advocated to be less tolerant to

controversial online adverts (Prendergast and Hwa, 2003). This is in line with previous research, suggesting that perceptions about adverts vary across media (Speck and Elliot, 1997; Christy & Haley, 2008), including both offline and online media contexts (Winer, 2009; Spence, Lachlan & Westerman, 2009; Michaelidou and Moraes, 2013; Kerr et al., 2013), leading to varied consumer outcomes (Jarvenpaa and Staples, 2000; Chen, Clifford and Wells, 2002; Karson and Fisher, 2005). For example, Truon and Simmons (2010) concluded that mobile advertising is perceived as more intrusive than advertising on social networking sites (SNS). More specifically, Michaelidou and Moraes (2013) argued that social media users perceive adverts on Facebook as less intrusive and excessive compared to the ones placed on YouTube. However, most research examining consumers' variations of advert perceptions has mainly focused on traditional media channels, such as TV (e.g., Lavine, Sweeney and Wagner, 1999; Kay and Furnham, 2013), and print media (e.g., Severn, Belch and Belch, 1990; Soley and Reid, 1988; Tinkham and Reid, 1988), whereas scholarly research on how consumers perceive adverts on social media, and specifically social networking sites (SNS), has remained largely silent.

Moreover, with regards to internal factors, religious commitment (or religiosity) and ethical judgement have been identified as significant antecedents of responses to sexual or shocking adverts (LaTour and Henthorne, 1994; Putrevu and Swimberghek, 2013). For example, Putrevu and Swimberghek (2013) recently confirmed findings brought by LaTour and Henthorne (1994) that ethical judgement influences consumer perceptions of sexual appeals in print media, suggesting that religious commitment is an antecedent of ethical judgement. However, the effects of such factors on controversial advert perceptions in online media platforms, and specifically SNS, remain largely unstudied to date, since extant research focuses exclusively on the context of traditional media settings (e.g., print media), hence limiting knowledge as to whether

controversial advert perceptions executed through SNS are shaped by ethical judgement and religiosity in line with advert perceptions elicited in traditional media settings. Our research contributes to theory and, at the same time, differentiates from previous research (e.g., Putrevu and Swimberghek 2013), in that it attempts to narrow the current knowledge gap by enhancing understanding of the interplay between ethical judgement, religious commitment and controversial advert perceptions, leading to attitudes towards the advert, brand and purchase intentions in the novel media context of SNS. The following sections review the relevant literature on controversial advert perceptions, as well as ethical judgement and religious commitment, leading to the presentation of a conceptual model with associated hypotheses. The methodology and analysis are then presented. The research concludes with a discussion of the findings, drawing interesting conclusions with implications for theory and practice.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Perceptions of Adverts as Controversial

In an advertising environment characterised by consumers with low motivation for processing messages and increased advertising clutter, controversial advertising has become a common way for advertisers to draw attention to their brands and products/services (Prendergast, Ho and Phau, 2002; Pope, Voges and Brown, 2004). Adverts perceived as controversial involve images, themes and slogans, which are meant to purposely evoke feelings of shame, disgust, resentment, anger or indignation (Waller, 2006). Previous research has identified two instances where adverts are perceived as controversial. These include adverts involving controversial products (e.g., female hygiene products, undergarments) or controversial execution (Barnes and Dotson, 1990; Waller, 2004). In particular, according to Waller (2006), the creative execution

used in an advert (even in the case where the product is not perceived as controversial) can lead to the advert being perceived as controversial. Creative execution often relates to issues of decency, fear, morality and sexism, and adverts are commonly perceived as controversial due to their portrayal of sex, sexuality and nudity (Waller, 2006). On the other hand, the use of sexual appeals as a creative execution method, may not necessarily lead to perceptions of controversy. For example, this is in the case where the product advertised is perceived to be ‘sexual’ in nature (but not controversial) and, hence, congruent with the theme of the advert (Boddewyn and Kunz, 1991; Grazer and Keesling, 1995; Pope, Voges and Brown, 2004; Waller, 2004). Hence, controversy may occur at different levels (e.g., low to high), with previous research suggesting that even moderate levels of controversy increase the likelihood of generating consumer buzz and reaction (Chen and Berger, 2013). In this study, we focus on consumers’ perceptions of adverts as controversial as a result of sexual appeal in creative execution (e.g., nudity) (Waller, 2004). Therefore, we examine consumers’ perceptions of controversial adverts in the interplay between ethical judgement and religious commitment, attitudes towards the advert, attitudes towards the brand and purchase intentions.

2.2 The role of Ethical Judgement and Religious Commitment in Controversial Advert

Perceptions

Ethical judgement is often used as a synonym for moral judgement, which is defined by Reidenbach and Robin (1990, p. 634) as the “*degree to which a portrayal, event, or behaviour is morally acceptable to the individual.*” Ethical judgement assumes the process of selection between what is to be considered “moral” and what should be classified as “immoral” (Jagger, 2011), and serves as a basis for ethical decision-making and behaviour (Jones, 1991) across all

contexts. Hunt and Vitell (1986, 1993) suggested that ethical judgement provides the key cognitive input into the formation of behavioural intentions and, ultimately, behaviours. Additionally, according to Greene and Haidt (2002), ethical judgement is very important in social contexts, where individuals attempt to influence one another and reach a consensus among friends and significant others.

In the context of advertising, previous research has theorised and empirically confirmed a link between ethical judgement and the use of sexual appeals in print advertising (e.g., LaTour and Henthorne, 1994). The authors suggest that controversial adverts involving sexual appeals and nudity raise ethical concerns (LaTour and Henthorne, 1994); and on the basis of the conceptualisation of ethical judgement and controversial advertising, one would expect that such a conceptual link would transcend across all media platforms, including digital platforms. In the context of our study we acknowledge this relationship (LaTour and Henthorne, 1994), however, we do not formally test it in our model¹. As such, we expect that a SNS advert, which is perceived to be less controversial will be more ethically acceptable, while an advert, which is perceived to be more controversial, will be less ethically acceptable. Given the relationship between ethical judgement and controversial advert perceptions, the focus of our research is on the role of religious commitment as moderator in this relationship.

Religious Commitment

According to Worthington et al. (2003, p.85), religious commitment refers to “*the degree to which a person adheres to his or her religious values, beliefs, and practices, and uses them in*

¹ Following a suggestion by a JBE reviewer.

daily living". The concept represents one of the primary determinants of social behaviour (Schneider, Krieger and Bayraktar, 2011) and shapes, not only the cultural environment, but also individual characteristics (Vermillion, Lassar and Winsor, 2002). Allport and Ross (1967) outlined the intrinsic and extrinsic components of religious commitment, while Davidson and Knudsen (1977) distinguished between subjective and behavioural components of religious commitment. In this study, in line with previous research (e.g., Schneider, Krieger and Bayraktar, 2011; Vitell et al., 2008), we adopt the intrinsic and extrinsic religious commitment classification, and draw parallels between intra-personal and intrinsic religious commitment, as well as between inter-personal and extrinsic religious commitment. Intra-personal religious commitment motivates an individual to shape all aspects of his/her daily life in accordance with his/her religion; while inter-personal religious commitment motivates the individual to conform to the social conventions suggested by the particular religion (e.g., church attendance).

Religious commitment² is a well-researched concept in the domains of sociology, psychology, ethics and consumer behaviour (Gartner, 1996; Worthington et al., 2003). In particular, previous research draws attention to the link between religious commitment, mental health and social behaviour (Davidson and Knudsen, 1977; Gartner, 1996), religious orientation and prejudice (Allport and Ross, 1967), awareness (Conroy and Emerson, 2004), ethical beliefs (Vitell, Singh and Paolillo, 2006), moral identity (Vitell et al., 2008) as well as ethical judgement (Walker, Smither and DeBode, 2011; Wong, 2007). In particular, previous research argues that there is a strong link between religious commitment and concern for ethical standards (Hunt and Vitell, 2006), and suggests that those individuals with a high level of religious commitment place

² Religiosity, religiousness and religious commitment are used interchangeably in the academic literature.

greater importance on moral absolutes than those with lower religious commitment (Hunt and Vitell, 1993). In other words, individuals who are more religious tend to be more perceptive of ethical problems than those who are less religious (Hunt and Vitell, 1993).

Further, in the context of marketing and advertising, religious commitment has been linked to decision-making (Delener, 1994), consumerism (Varul, 2008), purchase behaviour, (Sood, 1995) and has been found to influence attitudes towards the advert (Waller, Fam and Erdogan, 2005; White, 2000). In particular, studies have examined the influence of one particular religion, that of Islam, on perceptions of advertising content (Luqmani, Yavas and Quraeshi, 1987; Michell and Al-Mossawi, 1999) revealing differences in controversial advert perceptions between highly religious individuals and those less devoted to religion. Similarly, other scholars have identified variations in responses to controversial advertising, based on individuals' affiliation to a particular religion (e.g., Islam or Christianity) (e.g., Gibbs, Ilkan and Pouloukas, 2007), albeit without taking into consideration variations in the individual's intra-personal and/or inter-personal religious commitment. More recently, religious commitment has been found to influence consumer perceptions of sexual appeals in print media through the mediating effect of ethical judgement (Putrevu and Swimberghek, 2013). The authors argue that individuals who are highly committed to their religion (both internally and externally) judge adverts with prevailing sexual appeals as unethical, which in turn negatively affects both attitudinal and behavioural brand outcomes (Putrevu and Swimberghek, 2013).

The aforementioned literature confirms empirically the interplay between religious commitment, ethical judgement, perceived level of explicitness of sexual appeals (e.g. Putrevu and Swimberghek, 2013) and level of offence caused (e.g. Gibbs, Ilkan and Pouloukas, 2007) in

multiple contexts. As a result, in the context of our research, while we tested for a relationship between religious commitment and ethical judgement³, we focused on the more complex role of religious commitment in shaping individuals' ethical judgement in relation to controversial advert perceptions. In spite of the general lack of research in examining moderating relationships in the domain of ethical-decision making (O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005), religious commitment has been previously investigated as a moderator in relation to ethical attitudes and nationality (Peterson et al., 2010), as well as attitudes and intentions in the domain of software piracy (Aleassa, Pearson and McClurg, 2011), without, however, yielding significant results. In contrast, religious commitment has been found to strengthen the negative relationship between an individual's behaviour (i.e., taking the undergraduate course in ethics) and outcome (i.e., cheating in the exam) (Bloodgood, Turnley and Mudrack, 2008). On the basis of this stream of research, and on balance, we hypothesise religious commitment (both intrapersonal and interpersonal) as a potential moderator in the relationship between ethical judgement and controversial advert perceptions. To this end, we argue that the extent to which an individual adheres to their religious values, beliefs and practices is likely to moderate the relationship between their ethical judgement and controversial advert perceptions. Hence:

H1: Intrapersonal religious commitment moderates the relationship between ethical judgement and controversial SNS advert perceptions.

H2: Interpersonal religious commitment moderates the relationship between ethical judgement and controversial SNS advert perceptions.

³This relationship is not part of our hypotheses as it has been already tested by previous research.

2.3. The impact of Controversial SNS Advert Perceptions on Attitudes towards the Advert, Brand Attitude and Purchase Intention

Findings regarding the effects of controversial advert perceptions have been inconsistent. Authors argue about the benefits of shaping controversial advert perceptions (i.e., increased attention, brand awareness and recall, free media coverage) (e.g., Fordand, LaTour, 1993; Dahl, Frankenberger and Manchanda, 2003; Pope, Voges and Brown, 2004; Waller, 2006). Conversely, another stream of research highlights the negative effects of controversial advert perceptions including viewers' irritation, consumers' complaints, product/service boycotts, decreases in sales and brand equity value (e.g., Aaker and Bruzzone, 1985; Crosier and Erdogan, 2001; Millan and Elliott, 2004). Additionally, research has emphasised the negative impact of controversial advert perceptions on brand attitude and purchase intentions (e.g., Bello, Pitts and Etzel, 1983; Fam and Waller, 2003; Sabri and Obermiller, 2012), suggesting that although controversial advert perceptions trigger increased consumer attention (LaTour, 1990), they result in negative cognition (LaTour, 1990), distraction from the brand message and the brand name (Bello, Pitts and Etzel, 1983), and may even have a negative effect on product quality perceptions and company reputation (Alexander and Judd, 1978; Ford LaTour and Honeycutt, 1997; Prendergast and Hwa, 2003). In the context of online media, Prendergast and Hwa (2003) found that offensive advertising had a negative influence on purchase intentions, while more recent evidence shows that perceptions of adverts as controversial differ in an online environment, compared to traditional environments. For example, Christy and Haley (2008) found that media with broader audiences (e.g., the internet) generate higher levels of offense compared to more audience-specific media (e.g., men's and women's magazines) (Christy and Haley, 2008).

Given the inconclusive results presented in the literature and considering that the internet and social media, in particular, show a different level of tolerance to offensive advertising relative to other media (Prendergast and Hwa, 2003), further investigation of the link between controversial advert perceptions and attitudes towards the advert, brand attitudes and purchase intentions in the context of SNS is warranted. Scant empirical studies focused their attention on the level of sexuality portrayed in the print adverts and on affective responses to TV commercials (Batra and Ray, 1986; Severn, Belch and Belch, 1990; Putervu and Swimberghek, 2013) and how these relate to attitudes towards the advert, brand attitudes, advertising effectiveness and purchase intentions. Building on these studies we expect similar effects of controversial advert perceptions on the outcome variables. While the existing research has focused on the advert executions in traditional, offline media, we empirically test the hypothesised relationships in an interactive media platform, i.e. SNS. These social media have different characteristics than their offline, non-interactive counterparts, which possibly shape consumer responses to commercial content differently. Thus, we expect that perceptions of SNS adverts as being controversial will have an impact on attitude towards the advert, brand attitude and purchase intention. Hence:

H3: The more controversial the SNS advert is perceived to be, the more unfavourable the attitude towards the advert.

H4: The more controversial the SNS advert is perceived to be, the more unfavourable the attitude towards the brand.

H5: The more controversial the SNS advert is perceived to be, the lower the purchase intention.

Further, previous research emphasises the importance of attitudes towards the advert in impacting brand attitude, as well as the mediating role of attitude towards the advert (e.g., MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch, 1986; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989, Brown and Stayman, 1992). Attitudes towards the advert are defined by MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch (1986, p.130) as, “*a predisposition to respond in a favourable or unfavourable manner to a particular advertising stimulus during a particular occasion*” (also Lutz, 1985), and has been found to link to both perceptions and brand attitudes (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). Additional theories, such as the hierarchy of effects paradigm (e.g., Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Cacioppo and Petty, 1985) also emphasise the link between perceptions and behavioural actions (Karson and Fisher, 2005; Huang, Chou and Lin, 2008), through attitude constructs (i.e., attitudes towards the advert). To this end, the existing literature provides a solid theoretical platform that supports cognition or perceptions preceding attitudes towards the advert, leading subsequently to behavioural actions (MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch, 1986; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). Concurrently, there is an established conceptual and empirical link between attitude towards the brand and purchase intentions (Lafferty and Goldsmith, 1999; Li, Daugherty and Biocca, 2002; Eagleman and Krohn, 2012) as well as the role of the attitude towards the advert as a mediator (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). Hence:

H6: The more favourable the attitude towards the advert is the more favourable the attitude towards the brand.

H7: The more favourable the attitude towards the advert is the more favourable the purchase intention.

H8: The more favourable the attitude towards the brand is the higher the purchase intention.

H9: Attitudes toward the advert mediates the relationship between consumers' controversial SNS advert perceptions and brand attitude.

H10: Attitudes towards a) the advert and b) the brand, mediate the relationship between controversial SNS advert perceptions and purchase intention.

We explore the aforementioned hypotheses by empirically testing our conceptual model as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

3. Research Method

3.1 Advert Type and Context

Data was collected using an online survey designed to feature an advert within the context of SNS. In particular, the survey illustrated a sponsored official Facebook (FB) page of a brand of choice, where adverts, updates, and new information are featured and shared with followers. Facebook was chosen because it is the most prominent SNS in terms of usage (Colwyn, 2014). Among different types of adverts featured on Facebook (e.g., pop-ups, sponsored links and fixed banners, etc.), we focused our attention on sponsored official Facebook pages, as they serve advertising and other commercial purposes (e.g., shopping) and are more likely to attract attention and visibility (Brajnik and Gabrielli 2010; Kerr et al., 2012). Such pages are targeted at different Facebook users based on pre-specified criteria selected by the brand and pop-up within the Facebook “wall” as more subtle advertisements. The number of fans for these pages grows on

a daily basis, and it is estimated that each day about 10 million users become fans of different brand pages.

3.2 Facebook Advert Stimulus

As a first step, the authors examined several SNS adverts within the same product class (perfumes/deodorants), and three of them (Tom Ford, Dolce and Gabbana and AXE) were deemed appropriate for further pretesting. Perfumes/deodorants were selected as they represent a product category that most (if not all) consumers are aware of and/or familiar with; a non -gender specific product class (it offers products for both for males and females) and, at the same time, products within this category are not generally age-restrictive (Lass and Hart, 2004). Prior to data collection, 56 adult respondents (18-65) assessed the level of controversy of each of the three advert stimuli using a seven-point semantic differential scale (I would describe the advert as: absolutely not controversial/absolutely controversial). These three adverts were different in terms of the levels of sexual appeals portrayed in them (overt sexuality, sensuality and part-nudity, as per LaTour and Henthorne, 1994). The order of exposure of adverts was randomised across respondents to ensure unbiased answers. The FB Tom Ford advert page scored the highest in terms of controversy, with a mean value of 5.87 compared to 4.86 for AXE and 3.76 for the Dolce and Gabbana FB advert page. On this basis, we proceeded with the FB Tom Ford advert page.

3.3 Samples and Data Collection

Data for the study was collected via a nationwide online survey using a consumer panel obtained from the GfK agency (n=1000). The panel included both males and females aged 18 to

50+, living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in both rural and urban geographic areas. Respondents were reached through an internet-based, self-administered questionnaire, ensuring that all respondents were active internet users. Participation was voluntary. In our e-mail invitation we invited respondents who had their own Facebook account at the time of the research, and who were familiar with the Tom Ford advert to complete the online survey. Respondents were warned about the explicit theme of the FB advert page. Following recommendations by Podsakoff, MacKenzie and Podsakoff (2012) for mitigating potential common method variance (CMV) problems, we advised respondents that there were no good or bad answers and that they should answer candidly. We also scattered reflective items around the questionnaire so respondents could not identify items describing the same factor.

All respondents were exposed to the FB Tom Ford advert page and asked to answer a set of questions. A total of 296 surveys were returned, out of which 3 had missing values and were subsequently excluded from the study, representing a response rate of 29.3%. Given the relatively sensitive subject of the study, anonymity was a key issue taken into consideration in order to minimise potential confidentiality bias (Hair et al., 2010). Therefore, we were not able to identify non-respondents and contact them to inquire about the cause of their non-response; and we proceeded to examine non-response bias using the time trend extrapolation test (Armstrong and Overton, 1977). We compared the first and the last quartile (according to their time of response) of respondents and no significant differences were identified, suggesting that non-response bias is not an issue in our data.

Table 1

Table 1 shows the descriptive characteristics of the sample. On average, our respondents have a monthly household income of 1235.2 EUR (after tax), and visit religious places 5.7 times per month.

3.4. Measures

We relied on existing literature for measures of our constructs. We measured ethical judgement by presenting the FB Tom Ford advert page⁴ and asking respondents to give their judgement of the selected advert from the FB page, using Reidenbach and Robin's (1990) semantic differential items (e.g., fair/unfair, just/unjust, traditionally acceptable/traditionally unacceptable, morally right/not morally right, culturally acceptable/culturally unacceptable and acceptable to family/unacceptable to family). Controversial advert perceptions were captured by a single item "I would describe the advert as: absolutely not controversial /absolutely controversial"; while religious commitment was captured by items adopted from Worthington et al. (2012). Specifically, we captured intrapersonal and interpersonal religious commitment using six and four items, respectively (Table 2). Purchase intention was captured in line with Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) by measuring the subjective probability to perform the behaviour ('It is likely that I will buy x'; 'I intend to buy x'; 'Deciding for x when purchasing fragrance for myself is something that I would do'). Finally, to measure brand attitudes, we used a 4-item scale by LaTour and Henthorne (1994); and to measure the attitude towards the advert we used a scale from MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch (1986). All items were measured on a scale of 1-7 (1- 'Extremely disagree' to 7 - 'Extremely agree'). We also included several variables in our model to control for possible confounds (e.g., Christodoulides, Michaelidou and Siamagka, 2013; Dao et

⁴ FB Tom Ford advert page: <https://www.facebook.com/tomford>

al., 2014; Park and Stoel, 2005), including education, income, Facebook use, and previous experience with the brand.

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1. Reliability and Validity Assessment

The two-step approach proposed by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) was followed to assess the reliability and validity of the measures. First, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was undertaken using the maximum likelihood estimation procedure, covariance matrix as input data implemented in LISREL 8.7. Model fit was assessed using the conventional chi-square (χ^2) test, and a number of fit heuristics (Bagozzi and Yi, 2012). In estimating all items simultaneously, we obtained an excellent fit to the data (Table 2), with a non-significant chi-square (χ^2) value: $\chi^2 = 445.113$; $df = 180$; $\chi^2/df = 2.47$. In addition, all fit heuristics were well within cut-off ranges: Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.071; Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI) = 0.940; Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.044 and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.957, suggesting good model fit (Bagozzi and Yi, 2012).

Table 2

Subsequently, all constructs were submitted to reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity evaluations. The significant standardized factor loadings (lowest loading = 0.65; $p < 0.01$) of each item on predetermined factors supported convergent validity (Table 2).

Composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were all above recommended thresholds of 0.60 and 0.50, respectively (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). Additionally, we conducted Fornell and Larcker's (1981) test of discriminant validity, comparing shared variance between each pair of constructs to the value of AVE. Discriminant validity was achieved for all constructs (Table 3) since all AVE values were greater than the square of the correlations between each pair of constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Table 3

We also tested our data for Common Method Variance (CMV) using the widely used Harman's one factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003), which returned an unacceptable model fit ($\chi^2 = 4049.99$; $df = 247$; $\chi^2/df = 16.397$; $RMSEA = 0.230$; $NNFI = 0.589$; $SRMR = 0.191$ and $CFI = 0.632$), suggesting that CMV is not present in our data.

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

We estimated a parsimonious model using a covariance matrix as input data in LISREL 8.71 and a maximum likelihood estimation method. The results (Table 4) suggest that there is a significant decrease in chi-square results in moving from the constrained to the unconstrained model (at 5%), which is taken as an indication of the superiority of the constrained model. Also, fit indices of the unconstrained model (specifically NNFI and CFI) are superior to those of the constrained model. Accordingly, we decided to use the unrestricted model in interpreting our research hypotheses. In Table 4, path estimates and t-values for both the constrained and unconstrained structural models are presented.

Table 4

Thus, the results from the unrestricted model (Model 2) were used for interpretation. In the first instance it is worth noting that, in line with previous research, Model 1 showed a negative relationship between ethical judgement and controversial advert perceptions ($t = -5.270$; $p < 0.01$). That is, when an advert is judged as ethically acceptable, the level of controversial advert perceptions is lower. However, after introducing moderators (intrapersonal and interpersonal religious commitment) in Model 2, the impact of ethical judgement on respondents' controversial advert perceptions becomes significant and positive ($t = 4.997$; $p < 0.01$), implying that the moderation effects of intrapersonal religiosity and interpersonal religiosity change the nature of the previous ethical judgement - controversial advert perceptions link (exhibited in Model 1). Moreover, the results presented in Table 5 support both moderating hypotheses H1 ($t = 2.882$; $p < 0.01$) and H2 ($t = 2.871$; $p < 0.01$), which posit that the effect of ethical judgement on controversial advert perceptions is shaped and facilitated by the intrapersonal and interpersonal religious commitment of the respondent. Therefore, when a person has higher ethical standards and high intrapersonal and interpersonal religious commitment, the controversial advert will be perceived as even more controversial. Thus, we conclude that even though adverts that portray sex/sexuality/nudity might be judged as acceptable (e.g., morally acceptable, culturally acceptable) they will be still perceived as controversial when the levels of intrapersonal religiosity and interpersonal religiosity are high. To further explore the nature of the significant moderating influence of intrapersonal and interpersonal religious commitment on ethical judgement – controversial advert perceptions, we plotted the interaction effects in Figure 2,

following the recommendations of Aiken and West (1991) and Dawson (2014). As illustrated in in Figure 2, at higher levels of intrapersonal and interpersonal religious commitment, the relationship between ethical judgement and controversial advert perceptions becomes more positive. Moreover, when an individual has low ethical judgement and low religious commitment, the advert will be perceived as less controversial. At the same time, where religious commitment is high, combined with moderate to high ethical judgement levels, the advert will be perceived to be more controversial. Therefore, the results of our study highlight the role of commitment to a religion as a moderator, hence increasing our understanding of the nature of the impact of ethical judgement on controversial advert perceptions under varying levels of religiosity.

Figure 2

Further, the analysis provides support for H3 ($t = -3.992$; $p < 0.01$) as well as H5 ($t = -3.444$; $p < .01$). H6 ($t = 5.57$; $p < .01$) and H7 ($t = 2.012$; $p < .05$). Finally, brand attitude has a positive impact on purchase intention ($t = 5.496$; $p < .01$) providing support for H8. The only hypothesis that was not confirmed by our model is H4, in which we argued that perceptions of controversial adverts have a negative influence on brand attitude. As presented in Table 5, the assumed direction of the relationship was confirmed (negative), but it was not significant.

Mediation Effects

In order to test hypotheses H9 and H10, we used a bootstrapping method with bias-corrected confidence estimates (Hayes, 2012) as per Zhao, Lynch and Chen's (2010) recommendation and generated bootstrap results for indirect effects to determine whether the

mediation effects are significant. A bias-corrected bootstrapping method was selected over other methods (percentile bootstrap) because we wanted to ensure that real indirect effects were identified (Hayes and Scharkow, 2013) and to gain higher statistical power (Fritz, Taylor and MacKinnon, 2012). In the present study, the indirect effect was obtained with 5000 bootstrap resamples by using the PROCESS procedure in SPSS (Hayes, 2012), which allowed us to obtain the unstandardized estimates, 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals, and p-values for relationships specified through the dual mediator model. We used factor scores (as opposed to scale scores, computed as the mean of all high-loading items) in the PROCESS mediation assessment. This procedure ensured that there was no shared variance among the potential mediators and constitutes a part of the common procedure in similar assessments (Rutter and Hine, 2005).

The results of the mediation bias-corrected bootstrapping analysis confirmed the mediating role of attitudes towards the advert (st. estimate -0.0514) in the relationship between controversial advert perceptions and brand attitude (H9) since the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (from -0.0912 to -0.0234) did not include zero. Additionally, to test H10 we examined whether individuals' attitudes towards the advert and brand attitude were significant mediators in the relationship between controversial advert perceptions and purchase intentions. The results of the mediation analysis confirm the indirect effect of attitudes towards the advert (st. estimate -0.0151) in the relationship between controversial advert perceptions and purchase intentions (H10a), since the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (from -0.0362 to -0.0027) did not include zero. However, the indirect effect of brand attitude on the relationship between controversial advert perceptions and purchase intentions (H10b) was not confirmed as the 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (from -0.0448 to 0.0186) included zero.

Table 5

4.3. Robustness Test

To further investigate the moderating effect of religious commitment and to test the robustness of the model, we conducted a *post hoc* analysis (Zhou, Han and Wang, 2012), where we tested the model using new data derived from a sample of respondents from a different cultural and religious context. Given that the rationale for the *post hoc* analysis is not to replicate all hypotheses depicted in the model in order to draw cross-cultural conclusions, which falls beyond the scope of this study, but to cross-validate the role of religiosity and its moderating effects within a new context, we focused exclusively on only replicating H1 and H2.

Hence, we collected data from a convenience sample of 131 Russian respondents using an online questionnaire (Table 6). Participants were recruited through an online call announced on a web portal that invited them to click on the active hypertext link to complete the questionnaire. Our data consisted of 70.6% Christian, 26.9 % Atheist, 0.8% Muslim and 1.7% Buddhist, which corresponded to the religious breakdown of the country in which the *post hoc* data collection was conducted. In total, 23% males and 77% females completed the questionnaire. Of these, 86% of participants were under 30 years of age. The profile of the sample is consistent with statistics indicating that females between the ages of 18 and 34 are the most active online social networkers (Nielsen, 2012). Of these, 92% of participants were regular internet users and 55% spent more than one hour per day specifically on Facebook.

Table 6

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis using the additional data showed that all items showed high loadings (from 0.669 to 0.960). Validity and reliability were further demonstrated with high AVEs (from 0.61 to 0.678) and CR indices (from 0.694 to 0.869). CFA confirms the good fit of the proposed measurement model with fit indices, as follows: $\chi^2 = 102.11$; $df = 53$; $\chi^2/df = 1.46$, RMSEA = 0.0594; NNFI = 0.935; CFI = 0.956; SRMR = 0.0475.

The robustness test confirms both moderating hypotheses H1 ($t = 3.53$, $p < 0.01$) and H2 ($t = 2.07$, $p < 0.05$), confirming that the effect of ethical judgement on the perception of controversial advert is shaped, and could be changed, by the intrapersonal religiosity and interpersonal religiosity commitment levels of the user (see Table 7).

Table 7

5. Discussion

Our study examines the role of ethical judgement and religious commitment on controversial advert perceptions, attitudes towards the advert and brand and purchase intentions, yielding interesting results. Specifically, drawing on classic contingency theory, we examined the moderating role of interpersonal and intrapersonal religious commitment in the relationship between ethical judgement and controversial advert perceptions in the novel context of SNS and found support for 9 of the 11 hypothesised relationships. In particular, consistent with our expectations (H1 and H2), our results showed that both intrapersonal and interpersonal religious commitment have a robust moderating effect on the relationship between ethical judgement and controversial advert perceptions in the context of SNS. Hence, a high level of religious commitment, not only lowers the negative relationship between ethical judgement and

controversial advert perceptions, but also turns it into a positive relationship. This means that even though an advert is judged to be ethically acceptable, consumers with a high level of religious commitment will still perceive the advert as controversial. These results are further validated via *post hoc* analysis using additional data, which confirms that the relationship between ethical judgement and controversial advert perceptions is moderated by intrapersonal and interpersonal religious commitment. This set of findings underlines the key role of religious commitment in shaping controversial advert perceptions, yielding implications for the use of controversial advertising executions on social media and particularly SNS.

Further, unlike previous research that focuses their attention on the level of sexuality or explicitness in adverts (Fam and Waller, 2003; Prendergast and Hwa, 2003; Sabri and Obermiller, 2012), we investigate the controversy aspect of adverts executed via sexual appeal. Our findings show that indeed, controversial advert perceptions do have an impact on a variety of outcome variables. For example, our results indicated a negative effect of controversial advert perceptions on attitudes towards the advert and purchase intentions (H3 and H5). In the context of our research, this implies that the more controversial the Tom Ford FB page advert is perceived to be, the more unfavourable the attitudes towards the advert and the lower the purchase intentions are towards Tom Ford. Our findings do not provide support for H4, suggesting that, individuals' perceptions about the level of controversy of the specific advert do not directly impact their attitude towards the brand (e.g., Tom Ford). However, our results show that controversial advert perceptions indirectly impact attitudes towards the brand, via attitudes towards the advert (H10a), thus confirming previous research (MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch, 1986; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989).

Moreover, we also test for inter-relationships between constructs (H6-H8), confirming the positive direct effects between attitudes towards the advert and brand attitude (H6); attitudes towards the advert and purchase intentions (H7); and brand attitudes and purchase intentions (H8). Therefore, in line with previous research (MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch, 1986; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989), we confirmed that attitudes towards the advert influences purchase intentions. Finally, we also confirmed the indirect effect of controversial advert perceptions on purchase intentions via attitudes towards the advert (H9). Thus, attitudes towards the adverts are seen as a mediator in the relationship between controversial advert perceptions and purchase intentions.

6. Conclusions, Implications and Further Research

In view of the vast proliferation of SNS as advertising platforms, it has become even more important to develop an understanding of SNS users' ethical judgement and religious commitment, which shape perceptions of SNS adverts and affect purchase decisions. Our study contributes towards this end, by adding to the growing body of knowledge that is dealing with ethical issues in the context of digital advertising (Giebelhausen and Novak, 2012; Kerr et al., 2012) and, more specifically, SNS advertising. In particular, we examined the impact of controversial advert perceptions on attitudes towards the advert, attitudes towards the brand and purchase intentions and, concurrently, shed more light on the roles of religious commitment and ethical judgement in shaping controversial advert perceptions. Our study revealed noteworthy results with regards to the moderating role of religious commitment in the relationship between ethical judgement and controversial advert perceptions in the context of SNS, with theoretical and practical implications.

6.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications

First, in terms of theoretical implications, this research contributes to theory by examining ethical judgement and religious commitment in a novel and topical context, that of SNS. To this end, we modelled religious commitment as a moderator and confirmed its effect on the interaction between consumers' ethical judgement and controversial advert perceptions on SNS, using two different data sets. The key contribution is seen in the strength of the impact that religious commitment has, where it alters the direction of the relationship between ethical judgement and controversial advert perceptions.

Second, our study offers valuable and relevant insights to practitioners by highlighting the role of ethical judgement and religious commitment in shaping controversial advert perceptions on SNS. In particular, our study suggests that SNS adverts using controversial executions (e.g., sexual appeals) may offend consumers with higher religious commitments, even if the advert is perceived to be ethically acceptable (e.g., social marketing campaigns about sexually transmitted diseases); subsequently affecting individuals' attitudes towards the advert and their intentions. Hence, advertisers should take these findings into account in creating SNS adverts, in an attempt to ethically engage audiences with advertising content. Additionally, one of the major benefits of SNS is targeted advertising on the basis of audiences' demographic information (such as gender and age). Given the results of this study, advertisers may consider religious commitment and ethical judgement when targeting specific individuals. In this context, if social media users' religiosity is publicly visible on SNS, for example, then extrinsic religious commitment is high and, therefore, it is advisable not to expose such individuals to adverts using controversial executions (e.g., sexual appeals) irrespective of whether the advert involves an ethical or socially responsible message (e.g., in the case of social marketing campaigns).

6.2 Limitations and Further Research

Like any other research, our study is not free of limitations. In particular, we used a single advert stimulus in the form of a FB page, which limited our ability to generalise across product categories. Future research should perhaps consider other SNS spaces, which would allow varied advert formats of different brands (e.g. YouTube) and may capture controversy using multiple distractor content to avoid potential demand artifacts. Additionally, our advert stimulus captured controversy in terms of execution focusing exclusively on sexual appeal and was measured using a single measure. Current literature argues that the usage of single item measures encourages the development of theoretically sophisticated models and permits stronger statistical control of potential confounders, while at the same time allows detailed investigation of mediating causal mechanisms (Hayduk and Littvay, 2012). However, future research may consider capturing controversial advert perceptions using multiple items. Other instances of perceived controversy could be examined too, such as SNS adverts involving controversial products (e.g., condoms, alcohol), or adverts with other creative executions involving fear appeals which are likely to trigger controversial advert perceptions.

Further, our study has focused on a specific SNS, that of Facebook, and although Facebook is the most commonly used social media platform (Colwyn, 2014), it would be interesting for future research to examine the relationships posited in this study in different social media platforms, such as Twitter and YouTube. Moreover, future research may also focus on other constructs not included in our study, which may affect purchase intentions, such as price, product quality perceptions and convenience that could potentially improve the explanatory power of the study's model. Last, but not least, future research may examine controversial advert

perceptions and the role of ethical judgement in situations involving gift purchases, in order to verify whether consumers are influenced in the same way by ethical judgement and religious commitment when buying products for others, compared to situations when they purchase for themselves.

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