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**Buy, Boycott or Blog: Exploring online consumer power  
to share, discuss and distribute controversial advertising messages**

**Abstract**

The availability of new media as a universal communication tool has an impact on the power of the general public to comment on a variety of issues. This paper examines this increase in consumer power with respect to bloggers. The research context is controversial advertising, and specifically Tourism Australia's "Where the bloody hell are you?" campaign. By utilising Denegri-Knott's (2006) four on-line power strategies, a content analysis of weblogs reveals that consumers are distributing information, opinion and even banned advertising material, thereby forming power hubs of like-minded people, with the potential to become online pressure groups. The consequences and implications of this augmented power on regulators, advertisers and bloggers are explored. The findings contribute to the understanding of blogs as a new communication platform and bloggers as a new demographic of activists in the process of advertising.

## **Introduction**

Self regulation within the advertising industry is a common model that exists in numerous countries throughout the world (Harker, 2004). One of its roles is to minimise the effects of controversial messages on potential customers and the broader community by empowering regulators to make rulings about controversial messages and remove them from the media if deemed necessary (Boddewyn, 1989; Harker, 2004; Rotfeld, 1992, Shaver, 2003). Regulator power is however limited to traditional media environments and does not extend to the internet sphere. As the influence of the internet on our daily lives increases, exchange platforms such as MySpace, YouTube, email and weblogs (blogs) appear to alter the roles and power of parties involved in the self regulatory process (consumers, general public, regulators, media and advertisers). For example, advertisers can freely distribute messages banned by regulators of traditional media on new media sites such as YouTube, while consumers may choose to share their opinions and influence others about advertising campaigns via blogs. This altered power within the advertising industry can have implications for all members, such as regulators, advertisers, as well consumers themselves. It is therefore important to understand what is happening and to consider what effect these changes may have in the future.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role bloggers have on the distribution of controversial messages and their potential power over advertisers and regulators. While reports are highly variable regarding the blogosphere, international media company Universal McCann (2008, p.5) suggests that “blogs are a mainstream media world-wide and as a collective, rival any traditional media”. Further, it says “the blogosphere is now so large that it is considered an accurate

barometer of consumer opinion” (Universal McCann, 2008, p.31). While the specific statistics do vary country by country and demographic to demographic, the rapid expansion of the blogosphere is undeniable. It is estimated that there are 184 million bloggers in the world, with 31% of those reading blog sites on a daily basis, 82% regularly watching video clips and 34% writing opinions of products and brands (Universal McCann, 2008). Further, in a report by the Australian Communications and Media Authority, it was stated that 40% of Australians read a blog or social networking site, with one in ten Australians writing a blog or uploading content to the internet (Simons, 2008).

The main research question addressed in this study is, “What power strategies do bloggers use to discuss and distribute controversial advertising?”. To examine the powers of bloggers, this paper applies the conceptual work of Denegri-Knott (2006), who developed a framework for understanding power strategies relevant to the internet. We apply this framework to bloggers by conducting a content analysis of blogs on Tourism Australia’s controversial ‘Where the bloody hell are you?’ campaign. Specifically, we examine how specific types of blogger empowerment are utilised to discuss and distribute controversial advertising, and the extent to which bloggers are able to shape, influence and mould the direction of opinion. This research contributes to the literature by adding to the understanding of blogs as a new communication platform and bloggers as a new demographic of advertising activists. It applies the Denegri-Knott (2006) model to bloggers rather than general internet users, anchors it in the context of advertising rather than broader online communication; and expands the model to include work by Huang *et al.* (2007) on blogger motivations.

The paper begins with a short review on the impact of new media on consumer empowerment. Details of the research context and findings on blogger empowerment are then presented. The paper concludes with a discussion that addresses the implications for theory, the advertising industry and future research.

### **Consumer Power and New Media**

Traditionally, advertising has been directed to consumers via mass media whereby prospective customers and the broader community are exposed to a message that may or may not be offensive. Advertisements can be judged offensive because they feature products that are controversial or the creative execution itself is controversial (Barnes and Dotson, 1990; Beard, 2008; Prendergast, Ho and Phau, 2002; Waller, 1999; Waller, 2005; Waller and Fam, 2003). If an advertisement is judged to be offensive in a traditional media environment, several responses can result. The complainant (the person offended) can complain by communicating directly to the advertiser, the media or to the regulatory body, whether it be a government body or an industry self-regulatory body. They can also act individually by ignoring the message, choosing to not purchase the product, boycotting the product, or telling others about their negative feelings (Volkov *et al.*, 2002). Possible collateral damage is illustrated by well-known advertisers Benetton (using images of actual inmates on Death Row in a campaign) and Calvin Klein (using young-looking models in sexual poses) whose controversial advertising campaigns in the US backfired resulting in damage to the company and brand image (Curtis, 2002; Irvine, 2000; Pope, Voges, and Brown, 2004). Certainly, fundamental marketing theory suggests that consumers have always had power over manufacturers in terms of their demand for goods or services (Kotler

*et al.*, 2006), as consumers can ignore, resist, adapt and control their own choices and this choice alone is a form of empowerment (Denegri-Knott, Zwick and Shroeder, 2006).

How then have consumers and the general public who deem an advertisement to be offensive (or inoffensive) become empowered in a new media environment? It has been generally recognised that the internet empowers consumers due to the amount of information it provides at the touch of a button, enabling consumers to make informed choices and reduce risk (Harrison, Waite and Hunter, 2006). However the internet is increasingly being used for more than just information. New media provides an opportunity for computer-mediated communication, which exponentially grows the impact of a response, and as such, creates empowerment opportunities in terms of communication and interaction, enabling constant electronic updates and fast communication with multiple individuals concurrently.

Denegri-Knott (2006) examined consumer power in the online environment and proposed four consumer power strategies on the web (1) control over a relationship, (2) information (3) aggregation and (4) participation. It is possible to apply these four strategies to blog activity with reference to controversial advertising. The first empowerment strategy relates to control over the relationship, where bloggers can control whether they engage with advertisers in terms of their advertising material. That is, if an individual finds an advertiser's campaign offensive, they can block communication from that company through spam filters or firewalls, unsubscribe from email lists and choose not to visit a particular website. Alternatively, if they enjoy a particular controversial advertising campaign they can download it for personal consumption, send it to

friends via email and talk about it on their blogs. The second strategy stems from the availability of information, so that the online community is much better informed about advertiser activities and the views of others in relation to these campaigns. This allows them to communicate further, and can lead to the third strategy of aggregation. Aggregation occurs when like-minded individuals join together in online environments to discuss specific advertising campaigns in either a positive or negative manner. This strategy can lead to anti-brand communities seeking to expose product faults or unethical advertiser activity. The final power strategy relates to participation, where consumers actually create content, such as spoof advertisements, making a clear statement of their like or dislike of the advertising communication.

To date, empowerment created by blogs has received limited attention, despite increasing acknowledgement of their popularity (Dearstyne, 2007). Blogs are a type of new media that has been described as “the most explosive outbreak in the information world since the internet itself” (Baker and Green, 2005, p. 2). Simply, they are internet-based journals, with comments from the public arranged in reverse chronological order that encourage interaction through computer mediated communication (Huang *et al.*, 2007). They are recognised as being an important contributor to Web 2.0, a new generation of services provided by the Web which also includes other collaborative tools, such as Mashups and Wikis (Dearstyne, 2007). Blogs have been classified in terms of their orientation – as personal versus topical, and community versus individual (Krishnamurthy, 2002) and can be further classified by their use, for example, journalism, business commentary, individual views (Dearstyne 2005).

It is obviously important to understand the characteristics of bloggers and why they blog. Lenhart and Fox (2006) described bloggers as younger than 30 years of age, heavy users of the internet and regular participants in technology-based social interaction. This desire to interact socially was also identified in the work of Huang *et al.* (2007) who examined the motivation and behaviour of bloggers and found five blogger motivations: self expression, life documenting, commenting, forum participating and information seeking. This paints a picture of people who like to express themselves and comment of things going on around them, including events in their lives. They enjoy chatting to other people in discussion forums as well as searching for information. It is possible to link their motivations with the four consumer power strategies identified by Denegri-Knott (2006) as illustrated in Table 1. New media provides bloggers with the power not only to search for information but to also have social interaction and participate in discussions, with control over how much they participate in, and develop those social relationships.

**Table 1: Motivations and power strategies of Bloggers**

Blogger Motivations	Blogger Behaviour and Power Strategies			
	Information Searching	Social Interaction		
	<b>Information</b>	<b>Control over relationship</b>	<b>Aggregation</b>	<b>Participation</b>
<b>Self expression</b>	Offer information	Choose to comment or avoid blog	Share with like-minded Bloggers	Create content
<b>Life documenting</b>	Offer information	Choose to comment or avoid blog	Share with like-minded Bloggers Heighten social	Create content Respond to posts



			relations	
<b>Commenting</b>	Offer information	Choose to comment or avoid blog	Reward like-minded views Discipline conflicting views Online pressure groups	Post comments Respond to posts
<b>Forum participation</b>	Contribute and seek information	Choose to comment or avoid blog	Heighten social relations Online pressure groups	Post questions Respond to posts Share links
<b>Information seeking</b>	Seek information	Choose to comment or avoid blog	Seek expert advice	Post comments Share links

Developed for this research from Denegri-Knott (2006) and Huang *et al.* (2007)

It is this combination of power and desire to share and discuss topics of interest that creates a buzz with reference to controversial advertising in particular. The target audience may have enjoyed the controversial advertising and wish to consume it further, talk about it and send it to colleagues. This attention can be leveraged by the advertiser (Waller, 2005), however the advertiser cannot control this activity and it is the bloggers who decide on the material to be distributed and discussed. The advertiser can however facilitate this process by providing material on the internet for distribution by interested parties via viral email and links to the website from blogs, thereby reaching an important target group that may have been difficult to reach using the traditional media.

The literature review suggests that new media has created a shift in power from the regulators to the consumers and the advertisers. If this is the case then it may have consequences for the traditional model of self regulation which is based on the power of the regulator, on behalf of the consumer, over the advertiser and the media. Foucault (1980) explains that such power is given because of resistance by certain parties to conform, which necessitates a balance between the parties involved. It is this balance between the main players in the advertising industry that is changing. The meaning of power is also often context dependent (Zimmerman, 1995). Therefore, this research examines consumer power in the context of blogging in an online environment with specific reference to controversial advertising.

### ***Research Questions and Methodology***

Four consumer power strategies in the online environment were identified by Denegri-Knott (2006) in her conceptual framework. While these were developed for the internet as a whole, they are examined here in the context of blogging to see whether there is any evidence of information, aggregation, and/or participation as power in the discussion and distribution of controversial advertising campaigns. The control over the relationship power strategy is not investigated as the very act of blogging is evidence that consumers have opted to engage in the relationship (Denegri-Knott, 2006).

Information is perhaps the most valuable commodity to consumers in an online community (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996; Denegri-Knott, 2006). Consumers seek and share information, communicate opinions and product experiences, and persuade others who hold opposing views (Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo, 2004). It is also conceivable that information is power in the

blogging community, that is, those who have the information have power or influence over those that do not. It is equally possible that those with the power will use it to influence perceptions of controversial advertising campaigns. Therefore, this research asks the question:

*RQ1: Do bloggers use information as a source of power to influence the perception of controversial advertising campaigns?*

Bloggging communities exist as an aggregated format for bringing people and opinions together (Dearstyne, 2005; Denegri-Knott, 2006). Depending on the nature of the controversial advertising, the bloggers united might represent a potentially powerful positive or negative force for the brand. This suggests the second research question:

*RQ2: Do bloggers aggregate as a like-minded force on controversial advertising campaigns?*

Bloggers have the technology available to participate in the blog conversation by providing their own links and files which may circumvent regulations on traditional advertising media, and can also create their own spoof advertisements which can be shared and distributed. This could be seen as evidence of Toffler's (1980) "prosumer" which blurs the role of producer and consumer. This suggests also that bloggers would be activists in controversial advertising campaigns, participating in the distribution of content, as summed up in the following research question.

*RQ3: Do bloggers participate and share content relating to controversial advertising campaigns?*

***Blogger behaviour has also been identified as information searching and social interaction***

***(Huang et al., 2007), which can be both positive (as a means of self liberation) and negative (as***

*a means of discipline and dis-inhibited behaviour). This behaviour is facilitated by the equitable environment online, where anyone can log on for universal and instant access. The internet has been described as anti-hierarchical, providing free spaces and opportunities for self-liberation (Denegri-Knott, 2006; Jordon, 1999). While this represents positive aspects of self-expression, it may also encourage people to communicate with perceived anonymity and without the barriers or inhibitions that they may demonstrate in face-to-face interactions. It also gives greater power to those most respected by the blogging community. While everyone can post an opinion, not everyone receives the same response, nor has the same power online. This, therefore, leads to the following additional research questions.*

*RQ4: Do bloggers use the online environment to discipline others?*

*RQ5: Do bloggers demonstrate self-liberating power in talking about controversial advertising campaigns?*

*RQ6: Do bloggers demonstrate dis-inhibited behaviour in talking about controversial advertising campaigns?*

### ***Case Background***

A case study design was considered the most effective way to answer the stated research questions. Using a case study enabled the examination of an entire network of communication in a concentrated environment and, thereby, provided an in-depth insight into such activities. The case used for this study is Tourism Australia's 'Where the bloody hell are you?' campaign. This case was chosen as the advertising campaign was global, cross cultural and controversial on a number of levels. Controversial advertising execution refers to "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). Execution based controversy appears to be increasingly popular with advertisers as they seek to gain additional attention, brand awareness (Brown, 2001; Mortimer, 2006 and 2007; Pope, Voges, and Brown, 2004; Waller, 2005) as well as free media coverage (Brown, 2001). Execution techniques commonly perceived as potentially offensive and high risk include: executions depicting anti-social behaviour, use of indecent language, nudity, racism, sexism, or executions that include overly personal subject matter (Waller, Fam and Erdogan, 2005). The ‘Where the bloody hell are you?’ campaign was controversial given it combined indecent language, a religious reference, beer and a bikini girl into thirty seconds. Self regulatory bodies in five countries received complaints about the commercial. The television commercial was banned in the UK (for 10 days), modified in Canada and had all expletives removed in four Asian countries (Japan, Korea, Thailand and Singapore). It also generated publicity globally with Chinese newspapers bearing the headline ‘Aussies swear’. In Canada, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation stated the use of the word ‘hell’ prevented the advertisement from being aired during family-oriented programs and showing the beer glass half-full also contravened the code of practice with regards to taste in advertising. In the US, while the television commercial escaped modification or abolition, it did come under the scrutiny of the American Family Association, who objected to the use of the word ‘hell’. It was only in the UK that the commercial was actually banned but this ban was overturned ten days later. Britain’s Broadcast Advertising Clearance Centre objected to the use of the word ‘bloody’, a word ranked 27 on its list of most offensive words (Anon., 2006). In its home country, Australia, the commercial also received many complaints to the Advertising Standards Board.

It was however, not just the controversial nature of the campaign that justified its selection, but also the new media response. In the first month after the international launch, over 100,000 hits were recorded on the website. More than 70,000 of these were recorded on the day of the television advertising ban in the United Kingdom. The television commercial was downloaded by people in 80%, or 156, of the world's 191 nations (Cubito, 2006). In total, by April 10, 2006, the television commercial had been downloaded more than 500,000 times. A spoof of the advertisement attracted 35,000 hits in the first 48 hours (Lees, 2006).

### **Content Analysis**

The role of bloggers in this controversial advertising campaign was evaluated by undertaking a content analysis of the blog sites. Blogs are a good testing ground for exploring alternative views (Chopin, 2008) and are a timed record of both attitudes and behaviours (Huang *et al.*, 2007). By April 2007, there were 70 million blogs with 1.6 million new postings per day and 120,000 new blogs created daily (Huang *et al.*, 2007). Social Media Tracker Wave 3, which tracked 17,000 users in 29 countries, found that 73% of participants had read a blog. More than half (56%) believed that "blogging is a good way to express yourself" and 32% said, "I trust blogger opinions on products and services" (Universal McCann, 2008, p.31). Hence, the sizeable and growing community of bloggers, as leaders in social media, opinion and drivers of innovation, represent an informed group, with the power to discuss and disseminate controversial advertising.

### **Sample Selection and Quality Checks**

The sample universe for this study is all identifiable and available blogs relating to Tourism Australia's 'Where the bloody hell are you?' campaign, posted on the internet during the three month period following the campaign launch, from February 24, 2006 to May 24, 2006.

Kassarjian (1977), whose article on content analysis is considered to be an important milestone in the development of this methodology (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991), stresses the importance of ensuring that clear rules and procedures are in place to achieve objectivity and consistency. The sample blogs were selected from a search on Google Blogsearch which revealed more than 8,000 blogs. The process of a Google search is in itself a random process. A subset of 200 blogs was taken from this population. This quota was extracted from the first blogs in the search results, on the basis that these blogs were most relevant to the advertising campaign. Blogs which did not relate directly to the Tourism Australia campaign or that were repeated were rejected and the next blog was included in the sample. This ensured a high level of homogeneity in the sample group.

The category system needed for the analysis of the blog content was developed from the literature on consumer empowerment in the online environment (Denegri-Knott, 2006; Denegri-Knott *et al.*, 2006; Harrison *et al.*, 2006; Huang *et al.*, 2007; Shankar *et al.*, 2006). The key writer in this area, Denegri-Knott (2006) proposed four power strategies. As mentioned earlier, given that all bloggers have decided to take control of the relationship by engaging in online behaviour, this strategy became redundant. The other three power strategies, that is, information as power, aggregation as power and participation as power are utilised in the analysis. Three additional behavioural categories, disciplinary behaviour, self liberation behaviour and dis-inhibited behaviour, taken from the work of Huang *et al.* (2007) were also added and operationalised from the literature. However, in trialling the category system, it became evident that dis-inhibited

behaviour was found to be related to self-liberation and therefore these two strategies were collapsed in the final results, resulting in the examination of five research questions.

When categorising the different types of behaviour identified on the blog sites, it was important to ensure that the category system was comprehensive, reliable and clearly related to the research questions identified in this study. The category system was nominal, that is, the dimensions of each category were identified and then counted at face value. These dimensions were developed a priori the data collection to ensure consistency and provide guidance and were designed for use on any blog in the context of controversial advertising. In each category, the number of dimensions was considered sufficient to detect meaningful differences across dimensions. A coding dictionary was also developed to clearly define categories and the dimensions within categories in order to assist with the training of coders and help enhance the validity of the study. The category system was found to work effectively, discriminating between dimensions in each category and categorising all required information.

Three coders were trained, including an independent coder who undertook most of the coding, and two of the principal researchers. The coders met the criteria of their independence to each other, similar background and previous research training (Davis, 1997). The coders discussed and developed category definitions, dimensions and process. They undertook a pre-coding exercise to identify any potential coding issues and to clarify the coding instructions. Disagreements were addressed through discussion. A debriefing session between the coders and all researchers confirmed understanding of the task and resolution of questions. To ensure reliability, all three coders coded a sample of ten blogs. Intercoder reliability, calculated by Holsti's formula (Davis,



1997), rated between 82% and 92%. The full breakdown of the intercoder reliability score across the different research questions is shown in Table 2. An intercoder reliability score of between .80 to .89 is considered ‘excellent agreement’ (Altman 1991), making the intercoder reliability in this research acceptable.

**Table 2: Intercoder Reliability Scores as a Percentage**

	<b>Coder 1* and 2</b>	<b>Coder 1* and 3</b>	<b>Coder 2 and 3</b>
Positive/Negative	80	70	90
Information as Power	89.6	85.7	89.6
Aggregation as Power	95.2	100	95.2
Participation as Power	87.1	85	87.1
Disciplinary Power	88.8	88.8	100
Self Liberating Power	90.9	72.7	91.6
Disinhibited Behaviour	93.3	82.8	96.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>88.4</b>	<b>82.6</b>	<b>92.5</b>

\*Independent coder

## **Results**

Generally, the activity on the 200 blog sites that were examined indicates that new media does provide people with powers that were not available off-line. Blog sites were being utilised to discuss and distribute the tourism advertisement amongst members of the general public, and in

this way, power is being placed in their hands of the participants. Also worthy of note is that much of the information dissemination is opinion, rather than fact. Further, file-sharing of the offending advertisement, plus spoof versions and information on the bikini-clad spokesperson and the advertising and production techniques were commonly shared amongst bloggers. The results, presented in Table 3, indicate that the majority of the users of this communication tool were either positive (52%) or neutral (31%) towards the ‘Where the bloody hell are you?’ advertisement. They were keen to share their views with like-minded people. A much smaller number of people utilised the web to express their dislike for the advertisement or to chastise the Australian Government or Tourism Australia. However, by far the greatest weight of negative opinion was aimed at the advertising regulators in the UK and Canada, with 58% neutral towards the advertising self-regulatory bodies, while 30% of bloggers displayed openly negative opinions.

**Table 3: Results of Content Analysis**

<b>Categories of interest</b>	<b>Dimensions of the category</b>	<b>Presence of Dimension</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Information as power</b>	Use information to make informed decision	129	64.5
	Use information to support SRB ruling	3	1.5
	Use information to question SRB ruling	56	28
	Use information to resist SRB ruling	5	2.5
	Use information to discipline others	44	22
<b>Aggregation as power</b>	Interact with other like minded members of public	169	84.5
	Engage in pro-SRB activities	0	0
	Engage in anti-SRB activities	9	4.5
	Form online pressure groups	0	0
<b>Participation as power</b>	Creation of own content	10	5
	Filesharing/ passing on links	118	59
	Post information only	53	26.5

	Posting own views and opinions	141	70.5
	Acknowledge and reward other's posts	31	15.5
	Criticise other's posts	1	0.5
	Surveillance	16	8
<b>Self liberating power</b>	Blog as confessional	127	63.5
	Heightened social relationship or standing online	13	6.5
	Opportunism	7	3.5
	Innovative practices	8	4.0
	Perceived anonymity	11	5.5
	Act on impulse	0	0
	No barriers or restrictions	88	44
	Post hostile messages	37	18.5
	Exaggerate	31	15.5
	Tell lies	0	0
<b>Positive to SRB 3</b>	<b>Negative to SRB 61</b>	<b>Neutral to SRB 116</b>	
<b>Positive to ad 105</b>	<b>Negative to ad 26</b>	<b>Neutral to ad 63</b>	

***RQ1: Do bloggers use information as a source of power to influence the perception of controversial advertising campaigns?***

Firstly, the majority of bloggers (64.5%) were well- informed with reference to the advertisement and used this information to make decisions and reach an opinion as shown below:

*“Tourism Australia recently debuted a new advertising campaign that turns on the slogan, “Where the bloody hell are you?” Very cheeky. Very Australian. And quite offensive to the ears of the members of Britain’s Broadcast Advertising Clearance Center. (With an uptight, bureaucratic name like that, it probably doesn’t take much to offend.) Last week, the group banned the campaign from the country’s televisions because it uses the word “bloody,” which, according to The Age, is the 27th most offensive word to the BACC. That’s behind bollocks (No. 6), bugger (No. 21) and sodding (No. 24).”*

This knowledge put the bloggers in a position of power in terms of questioning the ruling of the regulatory boards. Indeed, over 30% used the information to support, question or resist the SRB ruling as seen in the following blog entries:

*“It’s a bit hypocritical to ban it because of the word ‘bloody’ since they allowed it to be used by the star of Harry Potter in his last movie.”*

*“England banned it because they didn't like the word "bloody" and now Canada is banning it because they don't like the word "hell". Apparently you can say the "hell" in front of the children. Who can guess what America will find offensive about it? Hopefully something, all this controversy is better publicity than the advert itself. The advert, of course, highlights a cultural gap between Australia and the rest of the English speaking world because there are few Australians that would think anything of it. It is a common expression in the context within which it is used in the advert.”*

The information also enabled 22% of the bloggers to influence some power over other groups by disciplining those who did not support their opinions, such as the advertising regulators or the Australian Government. This use of discipline was also evident in the study of aggregation and participation below.

*“I can’t believe “bloody hell” is still considered an expletive in this day and age. It hasn’t been for at least a decade, as evidenced by its widespread use in advertising.”*

*“According to an Ad Age article, Tourism Australia spent oodles of \$ .. about \$6.2 million on research and branding. The result ... a more direct "invitation" to visit. Ian Macfarlane, marketing director, tells us that "Where the bloody hell are you" is "authentic" Aussie lingo. Altho I love the cheeky over the top tag, I can't help but wonder if the target audience will too. Will American think it's rude or will they get the intention. This is one of those "cultural marketing" challenges.”*

***RQ2: Do bloggers aggregate as a powerful and like-minded force on controversial advertising campaigns?***

The results provide strong evidence that bloggers join together to share their opinions with like-minded people, with 84% of the blog sites identifying that activity. The following blog entries show evidence that like-minded views are rewarded.

*“I feel the irreverent nature of the tagline works really well—but David Williamson's thoughts of it all being a little 'prawn on the barbie'-ish is precisely right.”*

*“It is funny how before I went over to Aussieland, I always thought that bloody is a rude word. It is actually a rude word, but the way you use it in Australia is not.”*

*“the problems of saying bloody on an advert is appalling. We aren't allowed to say it? Channel 5 news has refused to say it on TV!!! Why? I have heard vicars say bloody and the advertising censorship thingy agency said that it was offensive!”*

Another feature of Denegri-Knott's definition of aggregation in her consumer power typology is the disciplining of conflicting views. Applied in this context, it would create consensus and drive like-mindedness on controversial advertising campaigns. This is demonstrated in the following quotes.

*“Ummm, why exactly can 33 people make something like that happen in a country of 60 million? Fair enough if the majority of those 60 million took offence, but 33 people? What the bloody hell is wrong with this country?”*

*“When Lara Bingle asks ‘so where the bloody hell are you?’ at the end, she isn't swearing. ‘Bloody hell’ is a common phrase in Australia and is in no way malicious. So put that in your bloody pipe and bloody puff it”*

*“If they were offended by the phrase, they'll be offended by Australians. Best they stay home.”*

Bloggers aggregating together to share like-minded views and to discipline others can be considered as potentially a powerful force in the online environment. However, they seem to do little to direct this group power that they generate, with little evidence of any activity against the self regulatory bodies (4.5%), none in support of the regulators and a complete absence of online pressure groups. However, the follow blog entry does show that the online activity can affect consumer behaviour.

*“I enjoyed the ad but would not have gone to the website if it weren't for the buzz.”*

***RQ3: Do bloggers participate and share content relating to controversial advertising campaigns?***

Most bloggers participated by posting their views and opinions (70%) or posting information only (26%). Many (59%) also shared files or links, particularly the link to the television commercial or the spoof television commercials, “*Here’s a spoof of the TVC on YouTube ... hitting some home truths here*”. Or “*Check out this new info on bikini babe spokeswoman Laura Bingle*”. In this way, they became media distributors. Some (5%) even created their own content such as alternative advertisements. There was often an opportunity for others to post a comment about the blog, but only 15% of bloggers responded to these comments. Hence, it seems that communication in the blogosphere is not so different from traditional media. Communication was primarily through outbound messages in the form of opinion, information, links and content creation. Little conversation was evident, with only 15% responding to the posts of others, even when bloggers themselves ask for response, as demonstrated in the following blog entry.

*“Ladies living over-seas have you seen the ad ? If so please let me know what you think of it. Is it a good representation of us or does it make us look like idiots?”.*

***RQ4: Do bloggers use the online environment to discipline others?***

Although there was evidence of the use of discipline with reference to regulatory bodies or different nationalities there was very little evidence of the use of disciplinary power, either positive or negative, to discipline other bloggers. Indeed, there was not a great deal of interaction documented between those who blogged and those who posted comments. Some bloggers (15%) rewarded those who posted comments, “*Thanks Rob for taking the time to visit and for leaving an encouraging comment*”. There was only one blogger who criticised the comments posted. In very

few cases, the blog became a dialogue, generating mutual benefit, “*BTW, love the title Toby, hope all is well in your neck of the woods*”.

As the coding progressed, the dimension of disciplinary power was merged with that of aggregation. The responses demonstrated here were typically the reward of like-minded views and the discipline of conflicting opinion, and could fit equally well in the findings of RQ2.

***RQ5: Do bloggers demonstrate self-liberating power in talking about controversial advertising campaigns?***

There was evidence of the online environment providing a self-liberating power. To most of the writers (63%), the blog was a confessional, where they emptied their hearts, vented their anger and told the readers in no uncertain terms what they thought. This is demonstrated in the following blog entry.

*“So what the hell is wrong with you pommies? Why the complaints about using the word ‘bloody’? I have to give the poms the benefit of the doubt and assume that just like America a few uptight individuals control the media and are often heard, not because they say what the populace feels, but because they say it the loudest.”*

Sometimes there was evidence that blogging heightened the social relationships online (6%), especially through the comments that were posted. Many, such as the following, demonstrated the bloggers’ knowledge or even their sense of humour.

*“A new online tourism campaign from Australia, inviting tourists by asking it the Aussie-way: “Where the bloody hell are you?” One single message, selling the Australian brand. But what makes it so appealing is the use of Vividas video player which brings a great online video experience: full screen, high resolution and fast. It's another dimension of online branding than we're used to with Windows Media Player, Quicktime and other players. Great stuff, mate.”*

*“go to any railway station and you’ll hear it spoken, nay shouted from the platforms up and down this great southland. Call it their salute to trains and train drivers everywhere. Listen and you’ll hear the cry: “where the bloody hell are you?”.*

There was some opportunism (3.5%) and innovation (4%) demonstrated in the fact that some bloggers were able to announce that the ban had been lifted or were first to report on the ban in Canada. Or an Australian Chef’s blog which noted, *“Most people know how passionate I am about Australian food and wine and I was pleased to see in the TV commercial a few seconds of having dinner at Ulura”*. Or another optimist, *“Seems the Australian tourist board flies about 750 journalists and producers down each year. Might be interesting to spin off what the Netherlands did and invite a few bloggers down”*. All of these behaviours tended to have a self-liberating effect.

***RQ6: Do bloggers demonstrate dis-inhibited behaviour in talking about controversial advertising campaigns?***

There was also evidence of dis-inhibited behaviour, that is, behaviour that would be different or more uninhibited than in a normal face-to-face social setting. It appears that many bloggers (44%) felt no barriers or restrictions. They could say whatever they liked on their blog. Some (18%) posted hostile messages or even exaggerated the facts (15%). And some blogs, which could not be published in this paper, used expletives far worse than ‘bloody hell’.

*“So to all those whinging poms out there, you should bloody well stop being such sooks and go practice playing cricket or drinking tea or something.”*



As coding progressed, this dimension was merged with that of self-liberation, as the bloggers felt no barriers and exhibited a freedom to say whatever they liked. While this was sometimes hostile or even exaggerated, its effect still appeared to be self-liberating.

## **Discussion**

These results provide an insight into the dynamic and busy communication platforms that exist in the world of new media, a world in which the existing self-regulatory bodies have no influence. Here, consumers gather together with those who share their opinions. The environment is generally supportive, with few instances of disciplinary power aimed at fellow bloggers. Bloggers provide information to support or question the decision of the self regulation board, but there is no evidence, in this instance, of bloggers organising themselves into a powerful force which could lead to more organised anti-brand or anti-self regulatory activity although there was some anti-nationalist sentiment. This insight into blog activity is supported by Badot and Cova (2008) in their examination of the conflict between the marketing discipline and consumers generally. They argued that there has been a shift of power due to advances in technology, with consumers not necessarily using this increased power for political ends but just having more control over the information they receive and what they do with it.

One of the main findings of the study is its support for the conceptual framework and empowerment strategies put forward by Denegri-Knott (2006). There is clear evidence that bloggers aggregate to form like-minded groups and to participate and share with others, resulting in a friendly and supportive environment in most instances. Further, the results also expand the

framework of Denegri-Knott by including the work of Huang *et al.* (2007) who examined the types of interaction amongst bloggers in more detail. That interaction consisted mainly of people sharing their views with others which provided both self-liberating power and awareness of the freedom the medium provided to them in terms of self-expression.

However, when we apply the online power strategies to the blogger's distribution of advertising, one of the main powers evident in this context was the user's ability to circumvent the self regulation board's ban of an advertisement. Indeed, The Tourism Australia case demonstrates that a ban in traditional media can drive people to purpose-built websites or blogs with links to the offending advertising.

This evidence of consumer power in the blogosphere augments the traditional power that consumers have always had in the marketplace (as suggested by the work of Denegri-Knott *et al.*, 2006 and Kotler *et al.*, 2006) and in the self regulatory process (Boddewyn, 1989; Harker, 2004; Rotfeld, 1992; Shaver, 2003). In addition to their right to complain to authorities or boycott the product, new media facilitates the transfer of information and opinion by instantly bringing together large numbers of like-minded people to chat, share information, compare views and have a dialogue about the advertisement itself or actions of the self regulatory authorities in a free and unrestricted environment. This creates a new type of complainant to the older, more conservative complainant in the traditional self regulation system, as described by Volker *et al.* (2002). This study found strong opinions were generated, but little evidence of pressure groups or collateral damage as reported in the work of Curtis (2002), Irvine (2000), and Pope *et al.* (2004). It is

unlikely that this public opinion would be instrumental in overturning a ruling of a self regulatory body, or even effecting its deliberation. Blogs do not have the visibility amongst board members or key influencers such as the media. Indeed, the fact that so few of the blogs support the self regulatory bodies is evidence of this. While some blogs, such as that of respected media like the Sydney Morning Herald, do have a high profile, they also have an editor, who becomes a defacto regulator.

Figure 1 summarises the power of the bloggers in the on-line environment with regard to advertising. It confirms the dimensions of information, aggregation and participation as power, as suggested by Denegri-Knott (2006). To these, it adds self-liberation (Huang *et al.*, 2007), but collapses the other suggested dimensions of disciplinary power and dis-inhibited behaviour. It augments these with the traditional consumer powers discussed in the literature (Boddewyn, 1989; Harker, 2004; Rotfeld, 1992; Shaver, 2003) to propose a typology for blogger power in the context of advertising regulation.

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INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

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### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

This study is the first to apply Denegri-Knott's conceptual framework, and demonstrates its application in the blogging environment and in the context of advertising. Further, it has expanded the model to include work by Huang *et al.* (2007) on blogger motivations.

The findings also have implications for the traditional model of self regulation, which is typically depicted as a closed system. It confirms that this process is being circumvented, as bloggers discuss and distribute banned advertising online, thereby confirming bloggers as a possible alternative and influential group of complainants in the self regulation process. Regulators could use blogsites to track public opinion on controversial advertising decisions, providing a more diverse and perhaps representative view to the traditional class on complainants in the self regulation process. This could lead to greater understanding of the complaining public and perhaps better deliberations in the future. It may be also useful to measure the speed and magnitude of the distribution of banned advertising material. Additionally, it may be important to establish whether advertisers are facilitating this process by creating purpose built websites such as [www.wherethebloodyhellareyou.com](http://www.wherethebloodyhellareyou.com) or by launching viral email campaigns.

For advertisers, this study suggests that consumers are discussing advertising campaigns online, regardless of whether advertisers are encouraging or ignoring them. Blog activity may be a rich source of feedback on advertising and a useful way to assess the health of a brand, if monitored with care. It is also important to point out that advertisers have an ethical duty of care to all members of the public. While facilitating the distribution of banned advertising material may

reduce the need for media spend to get a message across, it is important that this message does not offend the general public, regardless of whether or not they are the company's consumers.

Lastly, for bloggers, this study implies that they can possess some real power to spread controversial and perhaps offensive advertising to new consumers and new countries globally. With this power, should come some caution. Bloggers need to be mindful that perhaps the good work of the traditional self regulation process in protecting the rights of the innocent can easily be undone in the flick of an email.

### **Limitations, Future Research and Conclusions**

This exploratory study has a number of inherent limitations. Firstly, it is derived from a single case context. Secondly, it has focused on the internet and specifically, on blogs as a single response platform. Vital new media such as mobile advertising, as well as platforms such as YouTube, MySpace and similar user generated applications have not been analysed. Thirdly, although the number of blogs is increasing and the kinds of people joining their ranks becomes even more diverse, it still cannot be claimed that bloggers are representative of the general public. Further research could address some of these issues by widening the frame of reference of this study, testing other cases, other countries and even other new media such as mobile phones. It could also examine the other parties in the advertising industry – the advertisers, the media and the regulators themselves to see how their role has been revised by new media.

There is no doubt that the advertising environment has changed, and with it, the process of self regulation has been irrevocably altered. New media has increased the power of the general public by providing them with a world-wide unregulated form of communication and information transfer. In such an environment, one could argue that the impact of any traditional self-regulatory controls have the opposite effect, that is, the banning of an advertisement leads to an expansion in exposure and distribution. As long as these advertisements are being consumed by people who chose to consume them, and removed from the view of people who do not, then perhaps the self-regulatory system is still operating effectively and fulfilling its remit. However, if the advertisement is creating offense, such as degrading women or depicting racist images, then its distribution is of concern from a societal viewpoint. Much work needs to be done to rethink the system and recast the responsibilities of those involved.

This study raises a number of interesting and fundamental questions on the future of our existing self-regulatory systems, questions that have not yet been considered in the academic advertising literature. It is hoped that the study will lead to more discussion and research in the area.

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**Figure 1: Power of Bloggers in the Advertising Self Regulation Process**



