

How Products and Advertising Offend Consumers

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A growing research literature suggests when and why audiences will be offended by advertisements. The content analysis reported in this article tests hypotheses derived from the literature using actual consumer complaints about advertisements delivered via the mass media. Findings supported four of the study's five hypotheses, supporting conclusions that (1) audience members are more likely to be offended by offensive themes than the products, services, or ideas advertised; (2) some themes are predictably more offensive than others; and (3) advertisements delivered via more intrusive media are offensive more often than those delivered via other media. Implications of the study's findings regarding widespread audience offense are discussed.

ADVERTISERS, INDUSTRY OBSERVERS, and social critics have long been interested in public attitudes toward advertising's characteristics, effects, and ethical practice. Large-scale attitude and opinion studies were first conducted in the 1930s—a period during which advertisers often turned to off-putting themes and appeals—and increased during the 1960s and 1970s (for reviews of this literature, see Lowrey, Shavitt, and Haefner, 1998; Mittal, 1994; O'Donohoe, 1995; Pollay and Mittal, 1993; Zanot, 1981). As Beard (2003) notes, studies were chiefly motivated by concerns that negative attitudes could impact advertising's effectiveness and encourage support for public policies that could lead to problems for advertisers and their industry.

A related stream of research investigating advertising that audiences perceive to be particularly offensive also exists. Using mainly surveys of often convenience samples of college students, researchers have identified many potentially offensive products, services, ideas, and themes that encourage audience reactions of anger, outrage, distaste, disgust, or other type of offense (Advertising Standards Authority, 2002; Fahy, Smart, Pride, and Ferrell, 1995; Rehman and Brooks, 1987; Shao

and Hill, 1994; Shimp and Stuart, 2004; Waller, 1999; Waller, Fam, and Erdogan, 2005; Wilson and West, 1981).

Relationships among potentially offensive characteristics of advertising and actual audience offense, however, have never been tested with a sample of complaints about real advertisements delivered to a broad audience in a real-world context. This article describes and increases our understanding of relationships between advertising and audience offense via a content analysis of such advertising complaints.

BACKGROUND

It may seem obvious that most advertisers would prefer to avoid the potential for sales losses, declines in corporate goodwill, or even consumer boycotts resulting from offending audiences. However, as Waller (1999) observes, advertisers and their agencies often "encourage controversy as part of a campaign as a way to attract public attention and obtain extra publicity" (p. 289). Dahl, Frankenberger, and Manchanda (2003) similarly note the use of "shocking" content in advertising—content that "attempts to surprise an audience by deliberately violating social norms

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for societal values and personal ideals" (p. 269)—is on the rise.

Researchers have identified many products and services that may be inherently offensive. Rehman and Brooks (1987) conclude such products include personal and feminine hygiene products, undergarments, alcohol, contraceptives and pregnancy tests, warfare, and drugs for terminal illness. Their conclusions are consistent with those of Wilson and West (1981) regarding "unmentionables"; that is, products and services that—"tend to elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage when mentioned or when openly presented" (p. 92).

Waller's (1999) survey of Australian college students reveals that advertisements for "racially extremist groups" were most offensive. None of the other 15 potentially offensive products, services, and ideas he studied scored above a 3 on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being not at all offensive), with one exception. Students indicating they had "no religion" reported being somewhat offended by advertising for "religious denominations." Conversely, a survey of U.K. residents found that individuals with strong religious beliefs are more likely to report having been personally offended by an advertisement (Advertising Standards Authority, 2002). These findings are consistent with Waller, Fam, and Erdogan's (2005) conclusion that religious and historical factors play a much more influential role in determining attitudes toward the offensiveness of controversial products and services, compared to geography.

The literature's potentially offensive themes and reasons for offense include unconventional sexual practices, racial/religious prejudice, terrorism, and other antisocial themes (Waller, 1999; Waller, Fam, and Erdogan, 2005; Wilson and West, 1981). Waller (1999) concluded students were more likely to be offended by themes

and related reasons for offense than the advertised products, services, or ideas. Rotfeld (1999) observes that irrelevant sexual pictures and innuendo seem to dominate collections of offensive advertisements. The offensive nature of sexual themes was also found in Shimp and Stuart's (2004) exploration of the "everyday meaning of disgust in an advertising context" (p. 50). The second most frequently occurring category of disgusting advertising identified by their sample of students, after "gross depictions," was "indecent, sexually oriented, sexist, and sexually objectifying portrayals" (p. 50).

The U.K.'s Advertising Standards Authority (ASA, 2002) reports U.K. residents are most offended by the portrayal of children in a sexual way. Other offensive themes include the following (in order of offensiveness): (1) women in sexually degrading situations, (2) images/words unsuitable for children, (3) women in other demeaning situations, (4) portrayal of violence, (5) men in sexually degrading situations, (6) men in other demeaning situations, (7) swearing or bad language, (8) portrayal of mentally ill people, and (9) stereotyping of people. Although the ASA reports three-quarters of their respondents agreed the government or charities may use shocking advertising to make an important point, only 34 percent agreed that such a tactic is appropriate for commercial advertisers.

Several surveys suggest the potential for audience offense varies by audience characteristics. Fahy, Smart, Pride, and Terrell's (1995) survey of attitudes toward TV advertising for alcoholic beverages, products for children, and health/sex-related products reveals that women, particularly 50 and over, had much higher disapproval levels. The ASA's (2002) survey also confirmed that older women were more likely to report being offended by all the themes and portrayals they stud-

ied. Waller (1999) found that women tend to be more offended than men by alcohol advertisements, indecent language, nudity, sexist, racist, and other antisocial themes.

Research on attitudes in general toward advertising suggests they are more negative toward advertising in the broadcast media than the print media (Larkin, 1977; Mittal, 1994). The relationship between audience offense and media type, however, has gone almost entirely uninvestigated. One study, the survey conducted by the ASA (2002), found that U.K. residents were more likely to report being offended by advertising in what the ASA calls "push" media (in the organization's purview, outdoor, direct mail, and newspapers). "Pull" media—less intrusive media that are more in the control of audience members, according to the ASA—include magazines, the internet, and cinema. Most important was the ASA's finding that almost all (96 percent) of their respondents agreed advertisers should avoid potentially offensive advertisements if children may hear or see them.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND HYPOTHESES

A growing body of research regarding the characteristics of potentially offensive advertising suggests when, why, and how audiences are likely to be offended. However, with the exception of one content analysis of the U.K.'s ASA case study reports (Lawson, 1985), which focused mainly on different types of complaints in the nonbroadcast media and whether the ASA upheld them or not, hypothetical relationships between advertising characteristics and audience offense have never been tested using complaints about real advertisements delivered via a broad range of media. The study reported here makes such a contribution to the literature by testing the following hypotheses:

- H1: Advertisements for the literature's previously identified potentially offensive products/services/ideas offend more frequently than advertisements for other products/services/ideas.
- H2: The literature's potentially offensive themes and related reasons for offense are associated with offense more frequently than the potentially offensive products/services/ideas.
- H3: Offensive advertisements more frequently present the potentially offensive themes or reasons for offense previously identified in the literature than others.
- H4: Among the previously identified offensive themes and reasons for offense, words, and images unsuitable for children are associated with offense more frequently than all others.
- H5: Advertisements delivered via push media (outdoor, direct mail, newspapers, radio, and television) are perceived as offensive more frequently than those delivered via pull media (magazines, the internet, and cinema).

METHOD

The population of interest for this study consists of an archive of advertisement complaint adjudication reports published online by the Advertising Standards Authority of New Zealand (ASA-NZ). The ASA-NZ's Code of Ethics includes 5 basic principles and 12 rules. Rule 5 of the code states "Advertisements should not contain anything which in the light of generally prevailing community standards is likely to cause serious or widespread offence taking into account the context, medium, audience and product (including services)" (ASA, 2005). The media content analyzed for this study consists of the 308 complaint reports that refer to advertisements New Zealand residents complained about between 2001 and the end of 2004, and for which the ASA-NZ's chairman identified Rule 5 as at least one of the relevant code violations.

The ASA-NZ's archive was chosen primarily because it represents a broad, systematically recorded, and complete database of descriptions of advertisements about which consumers were offended and why they were offended. The adjudications are very thorough, ranging from 1 to more than 10 pages, often including multiple descriptions of the advertisements, statements by complainants, deliberations of the ASA-NZ's board members, and in many cases, statements from advertisers and media representatives. Although there are several advertising self-regulation organizations in the English-speaking world, the ASA-NZ is presently the only one to publish complete complaint reports for all media in a standardized format.

Categories for the study were developed from the ASA-NZ's advertising code and the offensive advertising research literature. Two categories included the literature's previously identified potentially offensive products, services, ideas, and potentially offensive themes and reasons for offense. The latter category was coded from the perspective of the complainant, relying only on his or her verbatim comments or summaries of them. A category was also developed to code the media in which the offensive advertisements appeared.

Two trained coders coded the complaint reports over a period of approximately eight weeks, after it appeared there was an acceptable level of intercoder reliability. Reliability was tested a second time, following the coding of the entire body of complaints, and using Skymeg Software's PRAM (Program for Reliability Assessment with Multiple Coders) software. A sample of 32 complaints was randomly drawn from the complaints in the population and recoded. Lombard et al. (2005) observed that higher criteria should be used for indices known to be liberal (i.e., percent agreement) and lower criteria for indices known to be more conservative (for example, Cohen's *kappa*). Both are reported in Table 1 for the variables used to test the hypotheses.

The reliabilities reported in Table 1 indicate acceptable levels of intercoder reliability, with the possible exception of

TABLE 1
Categories and Intercoder Reliabilities

	Percent Agreement	Cohen's <i>kappa</i>
Code of ethics principles	0.91	0.82
Basic ethics rules	1.00	N/A ^a
Product/service/idea type	0.94	0.65
Theme/appeal	0.84	0.78
Medium in which the advertisement appeared	0.87	0.82

^aThe PRAM software returns a Cohen's *kappa* of zero when percent agreement for a variable is 100 percent.

product/service/idea type. Although the category's percentage of agreement coefficient is high, the much lower and more rigorous Cohen's *kappa* suggests the findings based on this category should be interpreted with caution.

FINDINGS

Sixteen of the complaint reports were deleted from the sample during the coding because the existence of the offensive advertisements could not be confirmed by the ASA-NZ or the subjects of the offense were, in fact, not advertisements. One notable example of the latter was a radio promotion held in a railway station, during which a radio DJ allegedly invited volunteers to win CDs or concert tickets by "peeing in their pants."

About 41 percent of the remaining sample of 292 offensive advertisement complaints was found to be possible violations of Rule 5 of the ASA-NZ code and no others. However, some also represented possible violations of other ethics principles and rules. More than half (56 percent) of the complaint reports, for instance, also included possible violation of Ethics Principle 4: "All advertisements should be prepared with a due sense of social responsibility to consumers and to society" (ASA, 2005). About 10 percent of the cases also included the possible violation of Rule 4, Decency; and about 9 percent included possible violation of Rule 11, Advocacy Advertising (ASA, 2005).

Hypothesis H1 predicts that the potentially offensive products/services/ideas previously identified in the literature offend more frequently than advertisements for other products/services/ideas. To test this hypothesis, frequencies were collapsed into two categories—those potentially offensive products/services/ideas previously identified in the literature and all others—and the distribution of frequencies tested for statistically significant differences using

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chi-square. While many of the complaints involved advertisements for the literature's potentially offensive products/services/ideas, the results of the test failed to support the hypothesis.

Whereas about 15 percent of the complained-about advertisements were for the previously identified and potentially offensive products/services/ideas—the majority for feminine hygiene products (5.5 percent), followed by alcohol (2.4 percent), condoms (1 percent), and political parties (1 percent)—by far the majority were for other products/services/ideas. A tabulation of these other products/services/ideas revealed that a substantial number included a variety of adult and sex-related products and services (e.g., chat lines, massage parlors, sex shops). However, equally as many were accounted for by a seemingly innocuous assortment of products and services, the majority of which included clothing, food and drink products, public service announcements, and radio and TV station/program promotions.

Hypothesis H2 predicts the literature's potentially offensive themes and related reasons for offense relate with offense more frequently than the literature's potentially offensive products/services/ideas. To test this hypothesis, all 292 complaint reports were tabulated into four advertisement categories—(1) those that contained potentially offensive themes and related reasons for offense only, (2) those that presented potentially offensive products/services/ideas only, (3) those that contained or presented both, and (4) those that contained neither—

and the differences tested for significance using *chi-square*.

The results of the test supported the hypothesis ($\chi^2 = 211.47, df = 3, p < 0.000$). At 60 percent, the majority of the complaints included one of the literature's previously identified offensive themes and related reasons for offense alone, compared to only 8 percent of the literature's previously identified potentially offensive products/services/ideas alone. About the same number (9 percent) of the complaint advertisements contained both one of the previously identified themes and products/services/ideas, and the remainder (23.3 percent) contained or presented neither.

Hypothesis H3 predicts that offensive advertisements more frequently present the potentially offensive themes or reasons for offense previously identified in the literature than others. Whereas about 32 percent of the advertisements did not present one of the previously identified themes and reasons for offense, from the perspective of the complainants, by far the majority did. The results of a one-way *chi-square* supported the hypothesis, indicating that the difference in these frequencies is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 37.04, df = 1, p < 0.000$).

Hypothesis H4 predicts that "words and images inappropriate for children" would be cited more frequently as a reason for offense compared to any of the other offensive themes and reasons for offense previously identified in the literature. Because many of the complaint reports referenced multiple themes and reasons for

offense, the frequencies for all of them were tabulated, summed, and used for the test of this hypothesis. Among the 292 complaint cases, the reports contained explicit references to a total of 249 of the literature's previously identified offensive themes and reasons for offense.

As Hypothesis H4 predicts, words and images unsuitable for children accounted for the largest number of complaints (95), followed by offensive language (65). Frequencies and percentages for these and the other offensive themes are presented in Table 2. The results of a one-way *chi-square* supported the hypothesis, indicating that the difference among these frequencies is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 127.55, df = 5, p < 0.000$).

Hypothesis H5 predicts that advertisements delivered via push media (outdoor, direct mail, newspapers, radio, and television) are perceived as offensive more frequently than those delivered via pull media (magazines, the internet, and cinema). The results of a *chi-square* test supported the hypothesis ($\chi^2 = 203.89, df = 1, p < 0.000$). More than 90 percent of the complained about advertisements appeared in push, or more intrusive, media. The majority of the offensive advertisements were delivered via television (47

percent), followed by outdoor (16 percent), radio (16 percent), and newspapers (10 percent).

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Building on the body of survey research exploring relationships between potentially offensive advertising and audience responses in the form of offense and disgust, the results of this content analysis of advertising complaint reports extend the state of knowledge regarding offensive advertising in several helpful ways.

The results of the test of Hypothesis H1 fail to support the prediction that certain products, services, or ideas are so inherently offensive that advertisements for them are likely to cause substantial and widespread offense simply by their presence in the mass media. Products, services, and ideas that prior survey research suggests audiences often find offensive were the object of only a few of the advertisements New Zealanders complained about over the four-year period represented by the data. However, it is also important to note that this finding should be interpreted with caution for two reasons: (1) the category's reliability (as measured using Cohen's *kappa*) was low, and

(2) many previously unidentified, but inherently offensive services (e.g., massage parlors and sex shops), were unaccounted for in the coding.

Such inherently offensive products, services, and ideas are consistent with what Matthews (1997) calls "lost causes" for advertising agencies, for instance, cigarettes, gambling, and alcohol. He observes that, both ethically and practically speaking, agencies might want to question whether the makers of such potentially controversial products are clients they want to have. Similarly, Waller (1999) notes that agencies "should be aware of the possibility of causing offence by taking on a particular client or by the advertising appeal being used" (p. 289). The findings of this study, however, support the conclusion that advertising agencies should probably be less concerned about the former and more concerned about the latter.

The test results for Hypothesis H2 provide similar support for Waller's (1999) conclusion that audience members are more likely to be offended by themes and the often-related reasons for offense than the products or services advertised. In more than 60 percent of the cases, complainants described being offended because of themes or related reasons for offense alone. Rarely was an advertisement complained about because its object was one of the previously identified offensive products, services, or ideas, when it was not also paired with one of the literature's previously identified offensive themes or reasons for offense. Practically speaking, these findings are encouraging because potentially offensive themes are much more easily avoided or dealt with than the object of an advertisement—the mandated product, service, or idea.

The test of Hypothesis H3 confirms the offensiveness of the themes and related reasons for offense previously identified by survey researchers, and the test of

TABLE 2
Potentially Offensive Themes

	Frequency	Percentage
Images/words unsuitable for children	95	38
Bad language	65	26
Portrayed or strongly implied violence	24	10
Sexual themes and nudity	36	15
Gender-related demeaning or degrading situations	21	8
Use of stereotypes/prejudice	8	3

Note: N = 249

Rarely was an advertisement complained about because its object was one of the previously identified offensive products, services, or ideas, when it was not also paired with one of the literature's previously identified offensive themes or reasons for offense.

Hypothesis H4 provides additional specificity regarding these findings. Prior research on attitudes in general toward advertising and offensive advertising supported the hypothesis that advertisements containing words and images viewed as inappropriate for children are among the most offensive. Related findings also confirmed that bad language (swearing, coarse, crude, lewd, and blasphemous language) is one of the most frequent causes of offense.

The test of Hypothesis H5 contributes to the literature in its support for the prediction that audience members are more likely to be offended by advertisements in the more intrusive media. The literature on attitudes in general toward advertising, the sparse literature on offensive advertising and media context, and this study's other findings support the conclusion that such audience offense likely has to do with the difficulty of avoiding advertisements on behalf of themselves and their children.

Managerially, the implications of this study's findings for individual advertisers, when placed in a context of prior research, seem quite clear. If advertisers wish to avoid offense and/or controversy, they should carefully consider whether audiences are likely to perceive their advertising as inappropriate for viewing by children, especially if (1) the advertising is to be delivered via the more intrusive

media and (2) it contains a theme or image likely to offend.

Although many advertisers likely ascribe to the adage "there's no such thing as bad publicity," research confirms audience perceptions of unethical advertising can influence their evaluations of advertisements (LaTour and Henthorne, 1994; Tansey, Hyman, and Brown, 1992). Although Simpson, Brown, and Widing's (1998) study focused on the perceived ethicality of a deceptive advertisement, they also concluded that "the use of perceived unethical and deceptive factors in advertisements may significantly affect consumer responses to ads in a negative manner; thus, the use of potentially unethical advertisements may have negative ramifications for advertisers" (p. 134).

On the other hand, and somewhat cynically, if an advertiser were seeking to court controversy and outrage—as the Calvin Klein and Benetton brands often did during the 1990s—the implications of this study's findings are equally clear. Dahl, Frankenberger, and Manchanda's (2003) research regarding shocking advertising confirms it can be effective at enhancing attention and memory and can positively influence behavior, especially for younger audiences. However, individual advertisers should consider these findings with caution because Dahl, Frankenberger, and Manchanda's (2003) test of the effectiveness of "shockvertising" relied on an ad-

vertisement for HIV/AIDS prevention, an advertising objective for which most audience members appear to approve the use of shocking content.

The implications of this study's findings regarding the ethicality of audience offense for advertising as an industry and societal institution are no less important. Some offensive advertisements—such as shoe marketer Just for Feet's ill-fated Super Bowl XLI spot, in which a group of white hunters drugged and tagged a Kenyan distance runner with Nike shoes (Shalit, 1999)—likely occur inadvertently. However, as decades of survey research show, and this study's findings confirm, audiences are frequently offended by advertising that was either intended to offend or for which the offense could have been easily avoided. Recent estimates of advertisement exposure ranging from 3,000 (Lasn, 1999) to 5,000 (Creamer, 2007) per day strongly imply the use of increasingly aggressive and potentially offensive advertising will likely grow, as advertisers strive to break through their own self-imposed clutter.

The negative implications for widespread audience offense are not a new realization for advertisers and their institution. The core commonalities among the major advertising ethical codes, identified by Spence, Van Heekeren, and Boylan (2004), show attention to and concern with the ethicality of audience offense. As they point out, the core commonalities among the Australian Advertiser Code of Ethics, the British Codes of Advertising and Sales Promotion, the U.S. Better Business Bureau Code of Advertising, and the Canadian Code of Advertising Standards include the following: (1) a sense of responsibility to consumers, community concerns, and society; (2) decency, honesty, and truth; and (3) the protection and promotion of the reputation of the advertising industry.

If advertisers wish to avoid offense and/or controversy, they should carefully consider whether audiences are likely to perceive their advertising as inappropriate for viewing by children.

Perhaps more importantly, there is an historical precedent for concerns about the potential harm to advertising as an industry and institution caused by widespread audience offense. As some historians point out, advertisers and their institution were held in wide esteem by the general public during the first few decades of the previous century (Rowsome, 1970'). However, concerns about cutting costs and achieving greater impact with limited advertising budgets impacted the content of advertising during the Depression years of the 1930s. Rowsome describes the period's advertising and its consequences in the following way:

Traditional slice-of-life stories tapped emotions such as guilt, fear, shame, and blame to reinforce advertising appeals. . . . Many ads violated previous standards of decency.... The hard sell, as ad men kept telling each other in the privacy of their trade press, was the way to move The Product off the shelves. But it was not a means of enhancing advertising's reputation, which sank low in the thirties (Rowsome, 1970, p. 173).

The findings of this study highlight the importance of advertisers being aware of widespread and intentional audience offense as a factor that could erode public acceptance of their industry and institution. Advertising educators should also be aware of these issues and make certain students are exposed to the ethical implications of audience offense. Because virtually no one, including members of the general public, believes every potentially offensive advertisement is unethical, students need to know how and in what ways intentional offense can violate deontological or utilitarian ethical principles. This is especially important because raising ethical awareness and professionalism in the practice of advertising is the most viable solution to the problem of intentional offense.

The professional and institutional implications of this study's findings are perhaps best captured in the words of one of modern advertising's most influential contemporary practitioners, John O'Toole (n.d.J: "When executing advertising, it's best to think of yourself as an uninvited guest in the living room of a prospect who has the magical power to make you disappear instantly."

Raising ethical awareness and professionalism in the practice of advertising is the most viable solution to the problem of intentional offense.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The presence or absence of some variables was based on coding the manifest content of a complainant's statements and/or summaries of them. Thus, it is possible that a complainant may have believed an advertisement's content was offensive because it portrayed men or women in sexually degrading situations, but it would not have been coded as such if the complainant's comments or summary of them did not include a specific reference to it.

Future research on this topic could address this limitation by content analyzing the complained-about advertisements themselves.

Future research could also expand and improve the reliability of the category for potentially offensive products, sendees, and ideas. Those previously identified in the literature accounted for only a relatively small proportion of the advertisements complained about over a fairly long period of time—four years. It is possible that the acceptability of certain types of products, services, and ideas may change over time. It is also possible that the acceptability of different products, services, and ideas varies among different countries and cultures—another worthwhile extension of research on offensive advertising.

Many of the offensive advertisements contained graphic images and appeared to be offensive for that reason alone. However, this was not included as a category because offensive and graphic images alone had not been previously identified in the literature as a specific reason for offense. A notable example in the body of data was an outdoor advertisement that included embellishments in the form of (mock) severed human heads. Future research on offensive advertising could helpfully explore the nature of potentially offensive graphic images as a reason for offense.

Finally, the findings are generalizable to advertising in New Zealand and to New Zealanders. However, as noted earlier, Waller, Fam, and Erdogan's (2005) study of attitudes toward controversial products/services and reasons for offense across four countries—Malaysia, New Zealand, Turkey, and the United Kingdom—led them to conclude that "geography is not a major determinant of attitudes." Thus, and placed in a context of their findings, the implications of this study's findings are somewhat generalizable to other Western societies and cultures. Future research, however, could usefully examine in what ways members of non-Western cultures perceive and respond to offensive advertising themes and portrayals. <ej>

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