

# How Far Is Too Far? The Antecedents of Offensive Advertising in Modern China

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Previous research has classified offensive advertising into matter (offensive products and services) and manner (offensive execution). This study was designed to (1) develop a more comprehensive schedule of offensive advertising and (2) identify the psychological predictors of taking offense. A survey conducted in Hong Kong and Shanghai showed that offensive advertising could be classified into three categories: advertisements dealing with offensive sexual matter, advertisements for offensive nonsexual matter, and advertisements displaying an offensive manner. Of these categories, manner was perceived as the most offensive. Self-esteem and susceptibility to interpersonal influence both were significant in predicting the level of offensiveness for all three types of offensive advertising.

## INTRODUCTION

People may perceive advertising to be offensive for a variety of reasons (Aaker and Bruzzone, 1985). The issue is sensitive for agencies and their clients: In some cases, advertising that "offends" some audience pockets also has been found to significantly increase attention, benefit memory, and positively influence behavior (Dahl, Frankenger, and Manchanda, 2003). Such "positive offensive" outcomes, in fact, can benefit the brand (LaTour, Pitts, and Snook-Luther 1990).

"Negative offensive" advertising, by contrast, offends target audiences to the point where the outcome is anything but positive. Erotic stimuli in advertising, for instance, may produce a negative impression (LaTour, 1990) or simply may be irritating in its phoniness or overdramatization (Aaker and Bruzzone, 1985). Negative offensive advertising may damage a brand's image and endanger customer loyalty. The immediate consequences of offensive advertising include pressure on advertisers (to withdraw the material), media (to stop accepting the advertisements), or marketers (company/product boycotts) (Schwartz, 2001; Tilles, 1998; Wong, 2000). Over a longer term, offensive sex-role portrayals in advertising have had a neg-

ative impact on purchase intention (Ford, LaTour, and Honeycutt, 1997).

There has been substantial research on the risks and trade-offs of what is perceived to be offensive advertising. This study focuses on the role of self-esteem and interpersonal influence in determining perceptions of offensive advertising. It was set in an Asian context, studying consumers in Hong Kong and Shanghai.

As China modernizes and its buying power increases, it is presenting enormous opportunities to global marketers. Understanding the modern Chinese consumer is crucial to capitalizing on these opportunities.

## ADVERTISING OFFENSE CATEGORIES

There are two kinds of offensive advertising: matter (offensive products and services) and manner (offensive execution) (Barnes and Dotson, 1990; Wilson and West, 1981). Offensive matter (Wilson and West, 1981) involves the marketing of "unmentionables"—products, services, or concepts that elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offense, or outrage. Katsanis (1994) further refined the definition to include any product, service, or concept considered to be embarrassing, harmful,

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socially unacceptable, or controversial to some significant segment of the population. A more segmented view widens the scope of products (personal hygiene, birth control, warfare, treatments for terminal illness) and services (abortion, sterilization, treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, treatment of mental illness, funerals, and artificial insemination). Concepts such as unpalatable political ideas, palliative care, unconventional sexual practices, racial/religious prejudices, and terrorism may also fall within the classification.

What constitutes offensive matter evolves with time. Contraceptives, for instance, were long a taboo subject for advertising. But, since the 1960s, they have a regular uncontroversial presence in mainstream media (Wilson and West, 1981). In addition to changes driven by time, cross-cultural differences mean that geographic location also strongly affect perceptions of offensiveness. For example, Aaker and Bruzzone (1985) found that the three most irritating subjects for commercials in the United States were feminine-hygiene products, women's undergarments, and hemorrhoid treatments. In Australia, the three most offensive topics were racially extremist groups, religious denominations, and feminine-hygiene products (Waller, 1999). Chat-line services, sexual diseases, and dating services topped Singapore's most-offensive list (Phatt and Prendergast, 2001). Taking a wider perspective, offensive matter in Asia can be classified into four primary groups: sex-related products, social/political groups, addictive products, and health-care products (Fam and Waller, 2003).

In spite of its inherent objectionability—triggered by a variety of reasons that can include delicacy, decency, morality, or even fear—there is some evidence that public perceptions are evolving and that audiences generally understand the difficul-

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ties in formulating advertisements for offensive matter (Barnes and Dotson, 1990).

With offensive manner, critical determinants are the type of appeal and its execution—issues of "taste" rather than the promoted product. Responses to offensive manner typically include "insulting my intelligence" or "distasteful" or "too overtly sexual." Sexuality and fear appeals have been known to create offense. Strong erotic stimuli (i.e., nudity and overt sexual content) in some advertisements may produce negative feelings (Belch, Belch, Holgerson, and Jerry, 1981; LaTour, 1990). On a more psychological level, appeals that tap into fear may result in a person being exposed against their will to offensive images (Henthorne, LaTour, and Natarajan, 1993). Indeed, products such as deodorants, mouthwash, and dandruff shampoos have been criticized for their alleged attempts to create anxiety over the fear of social rejection (Belch and Belch, 1998). In an across-the-board enunciation of offense, one advertising agency study disclosed that consumers increasingly perceived advertising as insulting their intelligence (Bartos, 1981).

In evaluating standards of offense, we begin with a "norm" (Figure 1, Quadrant 1), a low-risk, comfortable spot where all the stakeholders find little offense in either the manner or matter of a campaign. The norm represents a general societal acceptance of the execution and nature of the product, service, or concept.

In Quadrant 2, the execution is deemed perfectly acceptable, but not the nature of the product, service, or concept. The redeeming element here is that people generally accept that some products are offensive, but nonetheless necessary (Barnes and Dotson, 1990). A straightforward campaign for sterilization services, for example, might offend a large number of people simply on the grounds that such services should not be advertised at all. Yet many people in the audience will accept that while the service offends them, others may need to be aware of it. In Quadrant 2, the agency and the advertiser face high-risk executional options over the creative. The ideal is a kind of "positive" offense—pitched at a high impact with an inoffensive execution.

In some cases (Quadrant 3), the matter is acceptable, but the advertising execution is not. The risk-reward stakes are high; the campaign may achieve high exposure and awareness (witness Benetton), but the content of the advertising may engender negative attitudes toward the advertiser. The "structural limit" to offensiveness is reached when both the matter and manner is highly offensive (Quadrant 4). In such cases, awareness is certain to increase, but "negative" offense can do so much damage to the brand that it overwhelms the positive awareness performance.

What most often makes advertising offensive in the eyes of a relatively cosmopolitan audience is likely not offensive

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products, but offensive execution. Consumers probably do understand that the nature of some products means that the advertising that supports them cannot be made inoffensive (Barnes and Dotson, 1990). Overall, agencies and their clients have more influence over offensive manner than they do over offensive matter. To change an audience's perception that a particular product, service, or concept is offensive would normally require an investment much larger than the costs involved in adjusting the manner of a campaign.

Offensive execution, however, is different because it is an optional creative strategy that advertisers *choose* to employ. Therefore, we offer HI:

HI: Offensive advertising manner is perceived as being more offensive than offensive advertising matter.

**PREDICTORS OF OFFENSIVE ADVERTISING**

Offense—shock, outrage, or stimulation—as a creative strategy is not new.

But its effectiveness is relatively unclear. Invoking sexuality—an offensive-manner category—may attract attention. Yet consumers may be so offended by the provocative execution that they boycott the company and its products (Phau and Prendergast, 2001; Schwartz, 2001; Tilles, 1998; Wong, 2000).

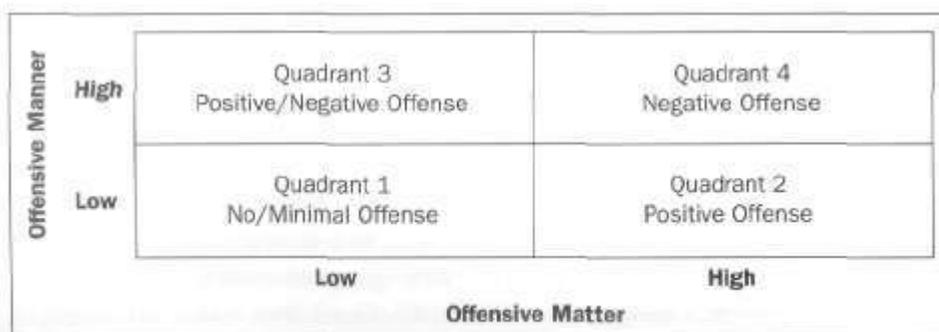
Perceptions of offensive advertising vary according to gender, and women are more offended by sexist themes or nudity (Phau and Prendergast, 2001; Prendergast and Huang, 2003). Cultural issues also appear to play a role in perceptions of offense. For instance, Muslims tend to be more offended by gender/sex-related products (Waller, Fam, and Erdogan, 2005). In addition, those more influenced by collectivistic attitudes and Confucian beliefs dislike advertisements that are threatening to social harmony (Fam and Waller, 2003). In the existing body of analysis on offensive advertising, the role individual psychology plays is largely missing. More specifically, issues of self-esteem and consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence seem to have been overlooked.

Self-esteem may be defined as "one's reputation with oneself" (Branden, 1994). In the context of offensive advertising, self-esteem is potentially a prime psychological variable. Past research has shown that persons with high self-esteem often exhibit low conformity (Hovland and Janis, 1959), as well as low persuadability (McGuire, 1968; Rhodes and Wood, 1992). Consistent with this notion, research has shown that adolescents with high self-esteem are more discerning and thoughtful in their evaluation of advertising (Boush, Friestad, and Rose, 1994).

Presumably, the logic chain suggests that people with high self-esteem will realize when off ensiveness in advertising really arises from offensive execution (i.e., offensive manner, not offensive products). On the other hand, people who are low in self-esteem tend to lack confidence in their own judgments (Boush, Friestad, and Rose, 1994). They will be less ready to question advertising offensiveness, be it of manner or matter, as they are likely to be more compliant and accepting (Cox and Bauer, 1964).

In a marketing context, susceptibility to interpersonal influence may be defined as the need to identify or enhance one's image through the acquisition and use of certain products and brands (Bearden, Netemever, and Teel, 1989). It involves willingness to conform to the expectations of others regarding purchase decisions, and the tendency to learn about products and services by observing others and seeking information from them.

Often treated by researchers as a unidimensional construct, susceptibility to interpersonal influence has both a normative aspect—the tendency to conform to the expectations of others (Burnkrant and Cousineau, 1975)—and an informational component—the tendency to accept information from others as evidence of reality (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955). Given that



**Figure 1 Advertising Offense Categories**

people with low self-esteem are more compliant, susceptibility to interpersonal influence relates to both self-esteem and the perceived offensiveness of advertising.

Indeed, researchers have found that self-esteem and susceptibility to interpersonal influence are negatively correlated (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel, 1989; Bush, Bush, Clark, and Bush, 2005; Clark and Goldsmith, 2005; Cox and Bauer, 1964; Kropp, Lavack, and Silvera, 2005; McGuire, 1968; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981; Stafford and Coughanougher, 1977). Again, in the context of marketing, people with low susceptibility to interpersonal influence and high self-esteem may be more offended by offensive manner than people who display the opposite trait combination.

Although such reasoning is sound in an individualistic context, it may not hold up in a collectivist culture, where people typically display greater susceptibility to interpersonal influences. Prior research has confirmed that susceptibility to interpersonal influence varies systematically across cultures, with susceptibility higher in collectivist rather than individualistic societies (Mourali, Laroche, and Pons, 2005). Similarly, people from more collectivistic cultures are more likely to be swayed by interpersonal communication (Kropp, Lavack, and Silvera, 2005). So it is not surprising that Chinese immigrants in the United States were found to be more susceptible to interpersonal influence than native-born Americans (D'Rozario, 2001; D'Rozario and Choudhury, 2000).

China is certainly a collectivist society (de Bary, 1966; Hofstede, 1980), with especially strong group orientation (Yau, 1988). In China, therefore, there should be a positive relationship between susceptibility to interpersonal influence and self-esteem. Conforming to the expectations of others does not necessarily reflect low

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self-esteem, and people from collectivistic cultures have on average higher affiliative tendencies and sensitivity to rejection (Grimm, Church, Katigbak, and Reyes, 1999). Being individualistic in China does not carry the status and esteem that it might in a Western culture. Approval of oneself requires approval from others. In Chinese society, where people expect far more respect than in the West, they will have relatively higher self-image and self-esteem when peer respect is strong. So Chinese should be more susceptible to interpersonal influence, as they have a greater need to identify or enhance their image with significant others, and they should be more willing to conform to the expectations of others (Mourali, Laroche, and Pons, 2005).

Applying this to Chinese advertising, there is likely to be a positive relationship between susceptibility to interpersonal influence and perceived offensiveness of advertising manner. If Chinese people find that their peers are offended by advertising, those who have high susceptibility to interpersonal influence will agree with their peers' views. In other words, embarrassment (or offense), in part, may be driven by concern for what others are thinking about them.

This line of reasoning leads to the following three hypotheses:

- H2: Self-esteem is positively related to perceptions of offensive manner in advertising.
- H3: Susceptibility to interpersonal influence is positively related to perceptions of offensive manner in advertising.
- H4: Self-esteem and susceptibility to interpersonal influence significantly interact and are positively related to perceptions of offensive manner in advertising.

## METHOD

### Focus groups

To begin the process, focus group sessions were conducted in Hong Kong and Shanghai to generate more information about offensive advertising and to test the suitability of the scales used to measure both the dependent and independent variables. In each session, one of the authors acted as the moderator. Each focus group had eight participants, four male and four female. Their ages were within the range of the sampling framework, and they all had been exposed to advertising in several media during the previous three months. In Hong Kong, the authors recruited participants; in Shanghai, a marketing consultancy firm recruited participants.

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### Sample

China is a collectivistic country with a low individualism index of 20 out of 125 on Hofstede's cultural dimensions, while the score for Hong Kong is 25 out of 125 (Hofstede, 1980). The study was conducted in China in order to address the issue involving a collectivist culture.

Hong Kong and Shanghai were chosen as sampling locations. Both cities have a collectivist Chinese culture influenced by Confucian beliefs and both play key roles in China's current economic and social development (Chin, Sun, Xu, and Hua, 2002). Hong Kong and Shanghai are regarded as the two engines of China's modernization, with Hong Kong in the south and Shanghai in the east (Hua, 1996). Neither the Hong Kong nor the Shanghai government is democratic, despite their different political backgrounds (Lo and Yip, 1999).

The total number of interviewees was 840, with 420 from each city. Quota sampling was used because of the constraints impeding random sampling in China. Within this method, the bases were sex and age. Equal numbers of male and female respondents, and equal numbers from different age groups, were interviewed using mall intercepts. Only interviewees who had been exposed to TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines in the past three months were interviewed. Virtually all the

people approached met this criterion. The interviews were conducted in Chinese, following questionnaire development in English and translation into Chinese. The results were checked through a back-translation procedure (Brislin, Lonner, and Thorndike, 1973; Tamanin, Ancona, Botega, and Rodrigues-Netto, 2002).

### Instrument

Building on previous research (Barnes and Dotson, 1990; Fahy, Smart, Pride, and Ferrell, 1995; Prendergast, Ho, and Phau, 2002; Prendergast and Huang, 2003; Triff, Benningfield, and Murphy, 1987; Waller, 1999; Wilson and West, 1981) and the two focus group sessions, a pool of potential reasons for advertising being offensive was developed. These reasons included examples of offensive matter and offensive manner to cover all the possibilities identified in Figure 1.

The final list of 13 potentially offensive products and services included alcoholic drinks, condoms, dating services, female contraceptives, feminine hygiene products, female undergarments, funeral services, hair-replacement products, male undergarments, pharmaceuticals, sexual disease prevention, AIDS prevention, and weight loss programs and products. The final list of potentially offensive execution styles surveyed included cultural stereo-

types, unnecessary fear, indecent language, nudity, sexism, sexual connotations, and "too personal" subject matter.

Respondents were asked to indicate their degree of personal offense to each of the offensive products and services and offensive execution styles. A 6-point semantic differential scale (1 = not at all offensive; 6—extremely offensive) was used to avoid central tendency and for higher discriminatory power.

The data were collected and the 20 items (13 offensive products and services and 7 offensive execution styles) were subject to principal components analysis (PCA) using a varimax rotation. Prior to performing PCA, the suitability of the data for factor analysis was assessed. All coefficients were 0.3 or above; the Kaiser-Meyer-Okin value was 0.85; and Bartlett's test of sphericity reached statistical significance.

The principal components analysis revealed the presence of three components with eigenvalues exceeding 1 and factor loadings of 0.5 and above, explaining 33.38, 21.76, and 9.90 percent of the variance, respectively. Based on Catell's scree test, the three components were retained for further investigation.

The rotated solution (see Table 1) revealed the presence of three components showing a number of strong loadings. The three-factor solution explained 65 percent of the variance. The three factors (with alpha scores) were labeled as offensive matter (nonsexual) (0.84), offensive matter (sexual) (0.88), and offensive manner (0.88). These results justified the use of an offensive advertising schedule with three subscales.

### Independent and control variables

Susceptibility to interpersonal influence was tested with 12 items (see the Appendix) from a scale developed by Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989). Boush, Friestad, and Rose (1994) and Day and Stafford

**TABLE 1**  
Varimax Rotation of the Three Factor Solution for Offensive Advertising

	Component*		
	1	2	3
Alcoholic drinks	0.695		
Dating service	0.707		
Weight loss products/services	0.740		
Hair replacement products	0.762		
Drugs	0.773		
Feminine hygiene products		0.549	
Female contraceptives		0.812	
Female undergarments		0.825	
Male undergarments		0.770	
Condoms		0.872	
Sexual diseases/AIDS prevention		0.782	
Sexual connotations			0.607
Subject too personal			0.827
Evoking unnecessary fear			0.800
Cultural insensitivity			0.732
Indecent language			0.859
Sexist, sexual discrimination			0.824

\*1 = nonsexual offensive matter; 2 = sexual offensive matter; 3 = offensive manner.

(1997) treated this as a unidimensional construct.

The self-esteem scale was adopted from Rosenberg (1965) and Boush, Friestad, and Rose (1994), with alphas of 0.59 and 0.73 for first and second administration in their studies, respectively. Three items measured the extent to which the respondent had a positive view of himself and a positive view of the future. Lower scores on the scale indicated lower self-esteem with 1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree. The three items are shown in the Appendix.

Given the sensitivity of many of the questions relating to offensive advertis-

ing, it was considered necessary to control for socially desirable responses. There were 10 true-false statements measuring social desirability bias, i.e., the degree to which people describe themselves in socially acceptable terms to gain the approval of others. An abbreviated version of the original scale by Crowne and Marlowe (1960) (see also Podsakoff and Organ, 1986) was used. The higher the score on the scale, the more a person tended to respond to questions in a manner he or she deemed socially desirable. The 10 items are listed in the Appendix.

The final section of the questionnaire collected demographic information. For de-

mographic variables, gender was dummy coded (0 = male and 1 = female). Age was dummy coded, with one dummy being 35 years or below (age dummy 1), the other being 50 years or above (age dummy 2), and an age between these thresholds used as the reference category. Education was dummy coded (0 = secondary school or below and 1 = junior college or above). Location was dummy coded (0 = Shanghai and 1 = Hong Kong). A final point to note is that the questionnaire was pretested on a smaller sample of respondents.

## RESULTS

The demographics of the actual respondents met the original quota criteria and provided an equal split between genders and among age groups. The reliability scores for the scales used to measure the independent variables were self-esteem (0.77), susceptibility to interpersonal influence (0.79), and socially desirable responding (0.60). For the socially-desirability scale, the alpha of 0.60 was achieved only after removing three items that had low inter-item correlations.

The intercorrelations among all the variables were examined and significant correlations were low, suggesting multicollinearity would not to be a problem (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001). Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of the perceived offensiveness of the three different types of advertising: non-sexual offensive matter, sexual offensive matter, and offensive manner.

A one-way repeated measures analysis of variance comparing the mean offensiveness scores revealed a significant effect for the type of offensiveness [ $F(2, 829) = 356, p < 0.001$ ]. Pairwise comparisons of the means revealed that offensive manner had a significantly higher mean than the other two categories of offensive advertising. This suggests that offensive manner is indeed perceived as being more

**TABLE 2**  
Perceived Offensiveness

Source	Mean		Mean Difference		
	Number	SD	1	2	3
1. Nonsexual offensive matter	2.82	1.0	—	-0.27*	-1.16*
2. Sexual offensive matter	3.09	1.2			-0.89*
3. Offensive manner	3.98	1.1	—		

Note: 1 = not at all offensive and 6 = extremely offensive  
\*Significant difference in means between pairs at the 0.05 level.

offensive than offensive matter. HI was therefore supported.

To test H2-4 (that self-esteem, susceptibility to interpersonal influence, and their interaction predict perceptions of offensive advertising manner), the procedures recommend by Cohen and Cohen (1983) were used by entering the following variables in a hierarchical regression: demographics (sex, marital status, age, education, location); socially desirable responding; self-esteem and susceptibility to interpersonal influence; and a self-esteem X susceptibility to interpersonal influence interaction term, for which the interaction variables were mean-centered (Aiken and West, 1991; Jaccard, 2001).

Although the focus of H2-4 is on the category of offensive advertising manner, to provide a broader picture regressions were conducted for all three categories of offensive advertising. The effects of demographics and the control variable were partialled out from the main effects and interaction effects. The interaction term contains both the main-effect terms. Because the main effects have been entered in a separate step, however, the final step of the regression gives the unique effect of the interaction term. The results are shown in Table 3.

The demographic variables contributed significantly to all three regressions, with

R<sup>2</sup> contributions of 9, 12.9, and 31.5 percent for perceived levels of nonsexual offensive matter, sexual offensive matter, and offensive manner.

Gender was a particularly significant predictor of perceived levels of nonsexual offensive matter ( $f_t = -0.255, p < 0.001$ ), perceived levels of sexual offensive matter ( $\beta = -0.349, p < 0.001$ ), and perceived levels of offensive manner ( $f_t = 0.100, p < 0.01$ ). Age (dummy 1) significantly predicted perceived levels of nonsexual offensive matter ( $\beta = -0.106, p < 0.01$ ) and perceived levels of offensive manner ( $f_t = -0.141, p = 0.001$ ), but did not predict perceived levels of sexual offensive matter. Education was a significant predictor of perceived levels of nonsexual offensive matter ( $\beta = 0.074, p < 0.05$ ) and perceived levels of offensive manner ( $f_t = 0.140, p < 0.001$ ).

The psychological variables (self-esteem and susceptibility to interpersonal influence) were significant predictors of the perceived levels of nonsexual offensive matter ( $F = 16.2, p < 0.001$ ), perceived levels of sexual offensive matter ( $F = 16.7, p < 0.001$ ), and perceived levels of offensive manner ( $F = 55.1, p < 0.001$ ) in all three regressions.

It should be noted that, consistent with the theorizing, self-esteem negatively correlated with perceived levels of sexual

offensive matter ( $f_t = -0.133, p < 0.001$ ), and positively correlated with perceived levels of offensive manner ( $f_t = 0.103, p < 0.01$ ). Susceptibility to interpersonal influence also positively correlated with perceived levels of offensive manner ( $f_t = 0.105, p < 0.001$ ).

The explained variance of self-esteem and susceptibility to interpersonal influence, beyond that accounted for by the demographic and control variables in steps 1 and 2, was 3.1, 2.7, and 2.2 percent for perceived levels of nonsexual offensive matter, perceived levels of sexual offensive matter, and perceived levels of offensive manner, respectively. For all three types of offensive advertising, there were no significant interactions between self-esteem and susceptibility to interpersonal influence.

The second specific hypothesis, which predicts that self-esteem should be positively related to perception of offensive manner, was supported, as was the third hypothesis—that the susceptibility to interpersonal influence should be positively related with perceptions of offensive manner. The fourth hypothesis—that self-esteem and susceptibility to interpersonal influence should significantly interact and be positively related with perceived levels of offensive manner—was not supported.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of this research indicate that offensive advertising can usefully be classified into three categories: nonsexual offensive matter, sexual offensive matter, and offensive in manner. As expected, the last category, which represents offensive advertising execution, was perceived as the most offensive. The central issue in advertising, therefore, is not the offensiveness of the product or service to be advertised. Instead, agencies and their clients should focus on the offensiveness of the execution and the associated creative tactics.

**TABLE 3**  
Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Outcome Variable	Step	Entered Variable	R <sup>2</sup>	ΔR <sup>2</sup>	df	F	β	
Offensive matter (nonsexual)	1	Sex	0.090	0.090	6	13.386***	-0.255***	
		Marital status					-0.036	
		Age 1					-0.106**	
		Age 2					0.053	
		Education					0.074*	
		Location					-0.051	
		2					Socially desirable responding	0.031
	3	Self-esteem	0.031	2	16.224***	0.135***		
		Susceptibility to interpersonal influence				0.114***		
	4	(Self-esteem) × (susceptibility to interpersonal influence)	0.001	1	14.690***	-0.031		
	Offensive matter (sexual)	1	Sex	0.129	0.129	6	20.011***	-0.349***
			Marital status					-0.004
			Age 1					0.015
Age 2			-0.015					
Education			-0.066					
Location			0.038					
2			Socially desirable responding					0.001
3		Self-esteem	0.027	2	16.774***	-0.133***		
		Susceptibility to interpersonal influence				0.135***		
4		(Self-esteem) × (susceptibility to interpersonal influence)	0.001	1	15.248***	-0.040		
Offensive manner		1	Sex	0.315	0.315	6	62.465***	0.100**
			Marital status					0.022
			Age 1					-0.141***
	Age 2		0.040					
	Education		0.140***					
	Location		-0.454***					
	2		Socially desirable responding					0.042
	3	Self-esteem	0.022	2	55.087***	0.103**		
		Susceptibility to interpersonal influence				0.105***		
	4	(Self-esteem) × (susceptibility to interpersonal influence)	0.003	1	50.063***	0.052		

Note: Personal income was excluded from the model due to differing currencies and coding for the Hong Kong and Shanghai income data. N = 822.

\*Significant at the p ≤ 0.05 (\*\*p ≤ 0.01, \*\*\*p ≤ 0.001) level

The study showed that people with higher self-esteem were more offended by an offensive manner of advertising than people with lower self-esteem—an indication that people with higher self-esteem seem to appreciate and understand the subtleties of advertising more than people with low self-esteem.

People with higher self-esteem are more discerning and thoughtful in their evalu-

ation of advertising, and it may be surmised that they realize that the offensiveness lies with offensive execution, not offensive matter (products/services/concepts). Conversely, marketers need to be aware that consumers with low self-esteem may be relatively more tolerant of offensive advertising execution, giving marketers greater executional flexibility in dealing with that audience segment.

Susceptibility to interpersonal influence was also positively related to the perceived offensiveness of advertising manner. Consistent with the literature, this study conceptualized susceptibility to interpersonal influence as the tendency for people to comply with the expectations of others, as well as the tendency to observe or seek information from others. People from collectivist cultures such as China

are more susceptible to interpersonal influence, implying that they have a higher need to identify or enhance their image with significant others, and are more willing to conform to the expectations of others (Mourali, Laroche, and Pons, 2005). Add to that the conservative Confucian influence that characterizes China and it is not surprising that people with high susceptibility to interpersonal influence are more offended by offensive advertising manner. When peers disapprove of (and are offended by) advertising manner, those highly susceptible to interpersonal influence may follow their peers' views in an attempt to gain their approval. If they do not follow what their peers think, they may be shunned and isolated. In that sense, interpersonal influence dictates their perceptions of offensive advertising.

**CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS**

This study clearly demonstrates the extent to which the matter and manner of advertising offend consumers. Moreover, it shows how self-esteem and susceptibility to interpersonal influence can modulate that response. The findings are particularly illuminating and useful because they relate to a collectivist society, and such cultural issues can never be ignored in marketing. The results show that, despite the sophistication of Hong Kong and the modernization of Shanghai, they remain conservative and, to some extent, collectivist. Interpersonal influence remains strong, as befits a Confucian culture. The results suggest that advertisers should not take too many risks with offensive advertising in China. Those with high self-esteem and susceptibility to interpersonal influence are discerning in the evaluation of offensive advertising and find offensive advertising execution largely unacceptable. The lesson for marketers is that they need to be cautious when deal-

ing with risky advertising manner or matter.

There has been some excellent prior work in the area of offensive advertising, and this study undoubtedly stands on the shoulders of that previous work. This research raises questions with regard to how the literature has conceptualized offensive advertising, for agencies and their clients have little control over how products, services, or concepts (the matter) are perceived. They do have more control, however, within the limits of legislation and voluntary ethical codes, over execution (the manner).

Finally, some limitations of these findings need to be pointed out. The logistical problems encountered in undertaking the study in Hong Kong and Shanghai were enormous, and several sacrifices had to be made to undertake the project. The first was that any attempt to examine consumer involvement and usage of the products and services identified in the instrument was abandoned, as the inter-cepts had to be timely.

For similar reasons, contextual variables influencing perceptions of offensive advertising that may have been relevant were not addressed. For instance, being male and in male company might reduce offense compared to being in female company (and vice versa), but this could not be properly addressed with the time available in a mall intercept.

In addition, as with many other studies, cause and effect remain difficult to disentangle. For instance, people highly susceptible to interpersonal influence may find a particular advertising execution to be very offensive. If they find that advertising of- fensive, they may reject advertising as a source of influence; as a result they may rely more on their friends to obtain infor- mation, resulting in high susceptibility to interpersonal influence. This would make susceptibility to interpersonal influence a

result of, rather than a predictor of, offen- sive advertising. Unfortunately, it remains unclear how to resolve such confounding information.

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## APPENDIX

### *Susceptibility to interpersonal influence*

I often consult other people to help choose the best alternative available from a product class.

If I want to be like someone, I often buy the same brands that they buy.

It is important that others like the products and brands I buy.

To make sure I buy the right product or brand, I often observe what others are buying and using.

I rarely purchase the latest fashion style until I am sure my friends approve of it.

I often identify with other people by purchasing the same products and brands they purchase.

If I have little experience with a product, I often ask my friends about the product.

When buying products, I generally purchase those brands that I think others will approve of.

I like to know what brands and products make good impressions on others.

I frequently gather information from friends or family about a product before I buy.

If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy.

I achieve a sense of belonging by purchasing the same products and brands that others purchase.

### *Self-esteem*

I feel good about myself as a person.

I can do many things well.

I am looking forward to the future.

### *Socially desirable responding*

I am always willing to admit it when I make a mistake.

I always try to practice what I preach.

I never resent being asked to return a favor.

I have never been irked when people expressed ideas very different from my own.

I have never deliberately said something that hurt someone's feelings.

\*I like to gossip at times.

\*There have been occasions when I took advantage of someone.

\*I sometimes try to get even rather than forgive and forget.

\*At times I have really insisted on having things my own way.

\*There have been occasions when I felt like smashing things.

\*Reverse coded