Religion and Controversial Advertisements: Sudanese Perspectives

Ilham Hassan F. Mansour* and Abuzar M. A. Eljelly**

This study aims to explore the consumers' attitude towards promotion of controversial products, the reasons why they are controversial and how it is affected by the degree of religious commitment in Sudan. This study presents the results of an online survey of 134 Sudanese respondents to determine the type of products seen as controversial when advertised on TV and why they are considered controversial. Research results revealed that in general Sudanese hold negative perception towards controversial products and their advertisements. The findings showed that the religious beliefs can potentially impact the perception of offensive advertising among Sudanese. However, Muslims of different levels of religious commitment show different degrees of offensiveness to controversial products advertising. These findings may have important implications for international marketers in countries with religious orientations such as Sudan, or other Muslim countries.

Keywords: Attitude; Controversial advertising; Religion; Islam; Sudan

Field of Research: Marketing

1. Introduction:

Religion is one of the most universal and influential social institutions that have significant influence on people’s attitudes, values and behavior at both the individual and societal levels (Mokhlis, 2009) and it is part of culture that plays a significant role in shaping people’s social and ethical behavior and its influence is observable in all aspects of Muslims’ life. This influence depends on the extent or degree a person adheres to his or her religious values. The more religious a person is, the higher concern of moral standards and the more of being conservative, (Waller et al, 2002).

Sudan is a multi-cultural, multilingual, multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-religious country where such diversities co-exist’ (Sudan Constitution 2005). Muslims constitute the vast majority (97% of its population) and the Islamic law and shariah rules form the foundation of the political, judicial, economic, and social systems. As such Islam plays a significant role in shaping people’s views and values and governing their attitudes and behavior. Regulations controlling public media are deeply influenced by Islamic

*Dr. Ilham H. F. Manour, School of Management Studies, University of Khartoum, Sudan. Email: e.mansour@uofk.edu,
**Professor Abuzar M. A. Eljelly, School of Management Studies, University of Khartoum, Sudan. Email: a.eljelly@uofk.edu
principles. Controversial advertisements in forms or contents that contradict religion, traditions, public ethics, and moral issues are not allowed to be aired on the Sudanese public and private TV channels. Yet Sudanese are exposed to such advertisements on foreign satellite channels which air these ads normally during the day.

This study will, therefore, examine the Sudanese attitudes towards advertising of certain controversial products and the reasons why an advertisement is seen as controversial. It is noted that the number of controversial advertisements is increasing and audiences are more likely to be offended (Waller, 2005). Further the study will analyze what influence religiosity has on attitudes towards the advertising of certain controversial products. Understanding of how religious beliefs and their intensity influence offence towards advertising of controversial products is of great importance to international advertisers and advertising agency managers in their efforts to improve advertising effectiveness.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: first, the review of the related literature is presented; followed by methods used, then the findings are presented and discussed, and finally the conclusion limitations and implications are presented.

2. Literature Review:

The influence of Islamic beliefs on individual and social behaviour is well documented (Luqmani et al., 1987; Michell and Al-Mossawi(1995); Michell and Al-Mossawi, 1999; Waller and Fam, 2000; Fam 2004; Mustafa 2011, Mansour & Diab (2016), Mohammad et al (2015)). For instance, in his study on advertising in Saudi Arabia, Luqmani et al. (1989) claimed that provocative and unconventional advertising strategies and advertisements must obtain prior approval from religious authorities. Failure to do so will result in alienation of a wide segment of the conservative Saudi public. Michell and Al-Mossawi(1995) investigated the religiosity effect on consumer attitudes toward advertising messages among British Christians and Muslims. They found that both Christian and Muslim respondents with higher levels of religiosity had significantly less favorable attitudes towards a contentious message, and conservative Muslims had much lower recall scores than liberal Muslims. Mostafa (2011) investigated Egyptian consumers’ attitudes toward advertising ethical issues and found that Muslims are more offended by unethical advertising than non-Muslims. Abassi et al 2011 investigated the ethical issues in the contemporary advertising campaigns of controversial products in Pakistan from Shari’ah perspective. The results revealed that Level of offensiveness towards advertisements of controversial products was found to be significantly associated with religious perceptions and nature of advertising appeals. Nudity and sexist images as advertising appeals were found to have significant association with the level of offensiveness of the consumers. Mansour & Diab (2016), reported that advertisements that depict female, singers and actors or using music or anything that contradicts Islamic guidance, may be considered offensive to devoted Muslims in Sudan. Mohammad et al (2015) studied the effect of religion on Malaysian consumers’ perception and attitude towards two controversial products only: cigarette and alcohol and their advertisement as the domain of macro-marketing. They found that Muslim consumers are more reluctant towards such products and their advertisement compared to other consumers. Fam et al. (2004) investigated the influence of religion and intensity of belief on attitudes towards
advertising of particular controversial products and services across six different countries. They found that devout followers of Islam considered advertising of gender/sex related products, social/political groups, health and care products, and addictive products very offensive compared to their more liberal followers and more offensive relative to other religions. Mansour (2014) examined the impact of religious commitment on consumers’ attitudes toward ethical issues in advertising in a Sudan. The findings revealed that the higher the degree of religious commitment the greater the degree of rejection and non-acceptance of the unethical offensive practices in advertising especially with regard to the misuse of women and children in TV advertisement.

Controversial advertising can be defined as: “advertising that, by the type of product or execution, can elicit reactions of embarrassment, distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage from a segment of the population when presented” (Waller, 2004). Controversial advertising refers to the products that may harm the public moral, affect physical health or considered socially indecent (e.g. using indecent language) and unmentionable in public because they are offensive, embarrassing or publicly sensitive. Wilson & West (1981) brought out a description of what can be controversial: “products, services or concepts that for reasons of delicacy, decency, morality or even fear, tend to elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offense, or outrage when mentioned or openly presented.”. Katsanis (1994) has further extended the definition of offensive products, as being “offensive, embarrassing, unhealthy, harmful to the environment, sexually oriented, or controversial to some significant segment of the population”.

The advertising of controversial products and the use of controversial images appears to be increasing around the world. Some products, simply because of their nature, may be perceived as controversial or some members of the community may see the public promotion of them as offensive. However, apart from the general ethical issue regarding the deliberate use of controversial/ offensive images for public viewing that may offend some people, it is important to determine attitudes towards offensive advertising (Waller & Fam, 2000). Controversial advertisements which cause a negative reaction, and thereby offence, can result in a number of actions like negative publicity, attracting complaints to advertising regulatory bodies, falling sales, and product boycotts (Fam & Waller, 2003).

Past studies on controversial advertising (Wilson and West 1995, Waller (1999); Waller and Fam, 2000, Waller et al., 2005) have suggested several products as being controversial when advertised, including cigarettes, alcohol, contraceptives, underwear, political advertising, female hygiene products, male underwear, pharmaceutical goods, political parties, weight loss programs and sexual diseases are all seen as controversial advertisements.

The potential of an advertisement to offend depends not only on the products and services, but also on the type of appeals and the manner of presentation. Previous studies examining advertising that can potentially offend have primarily centered on three basic aspects – the products being advertised, the creative execution used and the medium within which an advertisement is displayed.

Based on the earlier discussion, the study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What types of products advertising are considered controversial?
2. What are the most common reasons behind considering controversial products advertisements offensive for Sudanese consumers?

3. Does the level of religiosity have an influence on the way of perceiving controversial advertisements as offensive?

3. Methodology

To ascertain the degree to which the sample chosen for this study being offended by the advertising of controversial products, an online survey questionnaire was used for collecting the data to measure the attitude towards advertising of certain controversial products, and the reasons why they are controversial. The study used a survey administered through Google Forms survey and was circulated to participants through Facebook social network pages. The survey instrument included a list of 15 products from which respondents were asked to indicate their level of personal “offence” on a five-point scale, where 1 means “Not At All” offensive and 5 means “Extremely” offensive. The list of products/services presented was based on Waller (1999). The list of products include: Alcohol, Cigarettes, Condoms, Female Contraceptives, Female Hygiene Products, Female & Male Underwear, Funeral Services, Gambling, Charities, Pharmaceuticals, Political Parties, Racially Extremist Groups, Religious Denominations, Sexual Diseases (AIDS, STD Prevention), and Weight Loss Programs. The reasons for offence were also from (Waller, 1999) and include: subject too personal, antisocial behavior, unethical, racist image, sexiest image, violence, stereotyping of people, concern for children, hard sell, indecent language, and nudity. Also included in the questionnaire were questions relating to demographics, and intensity of religious belief, where the respondents asked to rate their religious commitment on a five-point scale where (1= not at all committed, 5= extremely committed).

4. Findings & Discussion

A total of 134 useable questionnaires were obtained, the respondents were Muslims and reasonably committed Muslims (with mean score of 3.16 out of 5). The agegroup of 20-30 made up most of respondents at 70%, followed by 31-40 age groupat 23 % and only 7.% above 40 years old. In terms of gender most of the total respondents (59%) were male while (41%) were female.

Attitude towards advertising of controversial products:

In order to measure the attitude towards the advertising of controversial products the respondents were presented with the list of the 15 products been advertised to indicate their level of been controversial. With a midpoint of 4 on a 7 point Likert scale Descriptive analysis of data on table 2 shows that of the top five controversial advertising, alcohol (mean =6.40) was perceived to be most controversial when advertised, followed by Racially extreme groups (mean = 6.21), Gambling (mean = 6.19), Cigarettes (mean = 5.75), Religious denominations (mean = 5.67),...
Pharmaceuticals (mean = 5.67), Condoms (mean = 5.1), underwear (mean = 4.57), Female contraceptives (mean = 4.33), Political parties (mean = 4.22). However, the results of this study revealed that Sexual diseases, Weight loss programs, Female hygiene products, Funeral services and Charities were perceived as not controversial with the mean score less than 4.

Table 1: Mean Differences in Perceptions of Controversial Products advertisements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Controversial products</th>
<th>Total Mean</th>
<th>High committed</th>
<th>less committed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol (1)</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>6.52</td>
<td>5.50**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cigarettes (4)</td>
<td>5.75</td>
<td>5.92</td>
<td>4.50**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambling (3)</td>
<td>6.19</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>5.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female contraceptives (9)</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condoms (7)</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmaceuticals (6)</td>
<td>5.53</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>4.81*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female hygiene products</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underwear (8)</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>3.75*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual diseases</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weight loss programs</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funeral services</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political parties (10)</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racially extreme groups (2)</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>6.18</td>
<td>6.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious denominations (5)</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>5.69</td>
<td>5.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>2.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: high controversial means are bold; standard deviations are in parentheses.
* p < .10 , **p < .05
In general when comparing the high committed Muslims (mean score ≥3) and less committed Muslims(mean score <3) the results revealed that respondents with high religious commitment tends to find advertising of controversial products more offensive relative to those with less religious commitments for all products except for Racially extreme groups and charity. However, there is significant differences between high committed Muslims and less committed Muslims with respect to advertising of alcohol (H= 6.52 & L=5.50, sig. 006) and cigarette (H=5.92 & L=4.50, sig. 002).

**Reasons for Offensiveness:**

Respondents were presented with the list of reasons for advertising offensiveness to indicate their level of offence. As shown in Table 2, the respondents indicated offense to all reasons (mean were greater than midpoint of 4 on a 7-point Likert scale). In line with previous studies (e.g. Abbasi et al 2011), the results revealed that for Sudanese, Nudity (5.86) is the most offensive reason, followed by Children concern (5.76), Racist images (5.74), Sexiest images (5.52), Anti-social behaviors (5.37), Stereotyping of People (5.33), and Unethical behavior(5.06). The rest of the reasons were found less offensive but these were above the midpoint of 4 as shown in table 2. Comparing religious commitment, high committed Muslims were significantly more offended than less committed Muslims for Sexiest images, unethical behavior, nudity and too personal subjects (Abbasi et al 2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for offensiveness</th>
<th>Total mean</th>
<th>High committed</th>
<th>less committed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Too personal subjects (12)</td>
<td>4.16 (2.18)</td>
<td>4.31 (2.17)</td>
<td>3.13** (2.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Anti-social behaviors (5)</td>
<td><strong>5.37 (1.2)</strong></td>
<td>5.47 (1.96)</td>
<td>4.56* (2.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Unethical (7)</td>
<td><strong>5.06 (2.01)</strong></td>
<td>5.22 (1.97)</td>
<td>3.88** (1.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Sexiest images (4)</td>
<td><strong>5.52 (1.81)</strong></td>
<td>5.69 (1.65)</td>
<td>4.25** (2.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Racist images (3)</td>
<td><strong>5.74 (1.87)</strong></td>
<td>5.79 (1.84)</td>
<td>5.38 (2.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Guns and armaments (8)</td>
<td>4.81 (2.14)</td>
<td>4.92 (2.07)</td>
<td>4.00 (2.48)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Conclusion:

This study aimed to increase the understanding of Muslims Sudanese attitude towards the advertisement of controversial products on TV from a religious perspective to determine the degrees of and reasons for the offence. Overall, in line with previous studies, it appears that Sudanese were less accepting and are offended by most of the controversial products advertising presented to them. As expected from most Muslims, Alcohol was perceived to be most controversial when advertised as it is being prohibited in Islam. The same finding was reported by Mohammad (2015). The second most offensive product is Racially extreme groups which can be explained by the fact that racism in Sudan is a complex matter due to the racial mixture of various populations. Gambling ranked third followed by Cigarettes, Religious denominations, Pharmaceuticals, Condoms, underwear, Female contraceptives, and Political parties. However, the results of this study revealed that Sexual diseases, Weight loss programs, Female hygiene products and Funeral services and Charities were perceived as not controversial all with mean scores less than 4.

As for the reasons why the advertisements offend the respondents, the results revealed that the respondents feel offense to all of reasons (mean were greater than midpoint of 4 on a 7-point Likert scale). The results revealed that for Sudanese, Nudity is the most offensive reason, followed by Children concern, Racist images, Sexiest images, Anti-social behaviors, Stereotyping of People, and Unethical behavior. The rest of the reasons were found less offensive but all were above the midpoint of 4. Same results reported by Mansour (2014) that Sudanese have negative attitudes toward ethical issues in advertising especially with using women and children in advertising. The study found that highly committed Muslims are significantly different from less committed Muslim in their perceptions of unethical issues in advertising especially with respect to exploiting women and children in advertising.

Finally, the study findings show that those with high religious commitment tended to find advertising of controversial advertising more offensive relative to those with less religious commitments for all products except for racially extreme groups and charity. However, there is a significant difference in attitudes between high committed Muslims and less committed
Muslims in respond to advertising of alcohol and cigarette. High committed Muslims perceived the advertising of alcohol and cigarette more controversial than less committed Muslims.

In line with earlier studies conducted in various Muslim and Arab countries this study showed that some of the highly rated reasons behind viewing controversial advertising are advertisements that include Nudity, Racist images, Sexiest images, Anti-social behaviors, Stereotyping of People, and Unethical behavior.

The study indicates that consumers’ religious beliefs can play a determining role in how people perceives product advertisement, thus encouraging marketers to consider the differences between these beliefs while advertising to ensure no potential consumers are alienated.

International companies with controversial products should be aware of what issues are offensive to their customers and be careful when deciding what images should be used in their advertisement of those controversial products or in the execution of their advertising campaigns. This is particularly important when entering markets where Muslim are majority. It is advisable to dedicate considerable time and resources on understanding cultural issues, and above all religious beliefs, upon entering a new market where advertising images can cause offence to people.

Advertisements of controversial or socially sensitive products can clash with the traditional and cultural values of a country, create negative impact in the minds of general public and damage the brand name or image of the company (Waller et al., 2004)

While the present study contributes new knowledge to the existing literature, it is not free from some limitations. However, the limitations of this study provide research direction for the future studies. This study used small sample size of online social media users from Sudan which might not reflect reality, so the results of this study should be read with this limitation in mind, especially if want to generalize the results to different Arab Muslims countries. Future studies could endeavor to measure levels of offensiveness towards specific advertisements, comparing offensiveness with other demographic variables such as level of education, gender and age.

Reference


– Mansour, I. H., & Diab, D. The Impact of Religiosity commitments on Attitude towards Celebrities Endorsed TV Advertising in Sudan.