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# CONSUMER ETHICAL JUDGEMENT AND CONTROVERSIAL ADVERTISING AVOIDANCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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## INTRODUCTION

Controversial advertising can be defined as advertising that offends or shocks viewers (Dahl et al. 2003). While some research on the ethical issues linked to controversial advertising offline can be found (Drumwright and Murphy 2009; Fam and Waller 2003), more research is needed on controversial advertising online and whether it may lead to ad avoidance on specific platforms, such as social media. This topic is important for marketers and researchers, given that the proliferation of social media advertising is driving brands to produce adverts which attempt to cut through the ad clutter with the use of controversial appeals (Dahl et al. 2003; Drumwright and Murphy 2009; Fam and Waller 2003; Waller 2005). Thus, this study aims to address this research gap and its objective is to examine the impact of controversial ad perception and consumer ethical judgment on ad avoidance, in the specific context of social media.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Advertising avoidance refers to audiences' actions which aim to reduce their exposure to ad content (Speck and Elliott 1997). The concept has been researched in traditional media contexts with research classifying avoidance as cognitive and behavioural in type (e.g. Speck and Elliott 1997; Abernethy 1991; Rojas-Méndez et al. 2009). In contrast, limited research has been devoted to examining ad avoidance in online contexts (Cho and Cheon 2004; Kelly et al. 2010). However, ad avoidance has become prominent given the increase in consumer exposure to high numbers of adverts through both traditional (e.g., television, newspapers) and online media (Gritten 2007; Schutz 2006a). Recent exploratory research shows that consumers try and avoid advertising on social media such as Facebook and YouTube (Kelly et al. 2010; Michaelidou and Moraes 2013).

A number of factors have been identified as antecedents of ad avoidance. Consumers often process and use the ads they view online to accomplish specific goals (Rodgers and Thorson 2000). However, such ads may also impede consumers' non-commercial goals, so they may avoid such ads due to perceptions of goal impediment (Cho and Cheon 2004). Additionally, according to Cho and Cheon (2004) audiences tend to avoid online ads if they perceive them as clutter, or if they have previously had a negative interaction or experience with online ads. In such instances, audiences are expected to dislike ads and intentionally ignore them through cognitive avoidance. On this basis, we hypothesise that: *H1 Consumers' antecedents (i.e. goal impediment, ad clutter and prior negative experience) will be positively related to avoidance of social media ads.*

Further, ad avoidance is argued to be affected by audiences' perceptions of ads. Such perceptions are concerned with the execution style and creative appeals used in the ad, and can be positive or negative (Hampel et al. 2012; Chan et al. 2007). Previous research shows that ads can be perceived as controversial due to either the nature of the product or the advertising appeal used (e.g. fear,

sexual, anxiety, violence), leading to ad avoidance (Dens, De Pelsmacker and Janssens 2008). On this basis, we hypothesise that: *H2 Consumers' perceptions of social media ads as controversial will be positively related to avoidance of social media ads.*

Perceptions of ads as controversial are grounded on contextual factors such as where and when the ad is shown, and who is exposed to the ad (Fam, Shyan and Waller 2003; Fam and Waller 2003; Phau and Prendergast 2001; Prendergast, Ho and Phau 2002; Waller 1999). On this basis, the media platform on which the ad is shown can impact the extent to which the ad is perceived as controversial. Previous research has shown that audiences present more tolerance, and perceive less offense, for online ads relative to other media (Prendergast et al. 2002; Prendergast and Hwa 2003; Christy and Haley (2008). However, this means that such ads may be perceived as more intrusive (Ha and McCann 2008). Hence, the extent to which audiences perceive social media ads as goal impeding, cluttering and negatively experienced will relate to perceptions of ads as controversial. Thus, we hypothesise that: *H3 Consumers' antecedents (i.e. goal impediment, ad clutter and prior negative experience) will be positively related to perceptions of social media ads as controversial.*

Moreover, ethical judgment of ads has been found to impact audiences' responses and behaviour (Beltramini 2006). For example, Simpson, Brown and Widding II (1998) have examined the impact of consumers' ethical judgement of deceptive advertising on responses toward ads, suggesting that the extent to which such advertising is perceived as unethical impacts attitude towards the ad, attitude toward the brand and purchase intention (Beltramini 2006). According to this stream of research we argue that, in the context of social media, ads that are perceived as less unethical will suffer less avoidance. Therefore, we hypothesise that: *H4 Consumers' ethical judgment of social media ads will be negatively related to avoidance of social media ads.* Simultaneously, we expect that the more ethical the ads are judged to be, the less they will be perceived as controversial. Thus: *H5 Consumers' ethical judgment of social media ads will be negatively related to perceptions of social media ads as controversial.* Additionally, we expect ethical judgment to moderate the relationship between controversial ad perceptions and ad avoidance on social media. On this basis, we hypothesise that: *H6 Consumers' ethical judgment of social media ads will moderate the relationship between consumers' controversial ad perceptions and ad avoidance on social media.*

## METHODOLOGY

A three-phase research design was used in this study. First the researchers conducted 4 focus groups with UK consumers to establish if consumers avoided social media ads and what led them to do so. This was followed by the development and refinement of hypotheses, in line with previous research (Cho and Cheon 2004; Kelly et al. 2010). A conceptual model was also developed and a quantitative pilot survey sought to test the appropriateness of existing scales to measure the impact of consumer ad perception (Chan et al. 2007), ethical judgment of ads (Vitell and Muncy 2005), and ad avoidance antecedents (Cho and Cheon 2004) on social media ad avoidance.

Once the pilot survey was concluded, the main survey collected data through an online quota sample of 270 UK consumers. Thirty-eight percent of respondents were male and 62% were female. Age distribution was appropriate for the study, with 8% of the total sample between 18 and 25 years old, 38% between the ages of 26 and 35, 21% in the 36-45 range, 25% in the 46-55 bracket and 8% in the 56-65 age range. Educational achievement was also varied, with 18% of the sample having completed

GCSEs, 35% possessing further education (A-level or equivalent), 30% with undergraduate degrees and 15% with postgraduate qualifications.

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Measures were adapted from existing survey instruments. Social media ad avoidance antecedents and ad avoidance measures were derived from Cho and Cheon's (2004) work. Ethical judgment was measured using the multidimensional ethics scale (Nguyen and Biderman), and controversial ad perception measures were based on Chan et al. (2007). All scales showed Cronbach's Alpha above 0.7, and Average Variable Extracted (AVE) scores above the required level of 0.5, in line with Fornell and Larcker (1981).

Further, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to assess the psychometric properties of the variables. CFA revealed satisfactory model fit ( $\chi^2 = 114.914$  (65),  $p=0.000$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.768$ ; RMSEA = 0.053; NFI = 0.974; CFI = 0.989; GFI = 0.943).

The hypotheses were then tested using structural equation modelling (SEM). The model and moderation analysis were estimated following the unconstrained method described by Steinmetz et al. (2011). The analysis generated the fit indices for the structural model ( $\chi^2 = 547.78$  (228),  $p=0.000$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.39$ ; RMSEA = 0.071; NFI = 0.963; CFI = 0.978; GFI = 0.875; Standard RMR = 0.049), and the hypotheses' tests for the SEM (*Direct effects*: H1: Antecedents  $\rightarrow$  Ad Avoidance = 0.49\*\*; H2: Controversial Ad Perception  $\rightarrow$  Ad Avoidance = 0.13\*\*; H3: Antecedents  $\rightarrow$  Controversial Ad Perception = 0.55\*\*; H4: Ethical Judgment  $\rightarrow$  Ad Avoidance = -0.18\*\*; H5: Ethical Judgment  $\rightarrow$  Controversial Ad Perception = -0.14\*; *Interaction*: Controversial X Ethical Judgment  $\rightarrow$  Ad Avoidance = 0.08\*\*; \*\*  $p<0.01$ , \*  $p<0.05$ , one-tailed regression tests. Numbers are rounded to two decimal points).

Data analysis confirmed that the model presents a generally good fit. All the relationships are significant, and the moderation effect of ethical judgment on the impact of controversial ad perception on ad avoidance is also demonstrated.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research contributes to theory by conceptualizing additional antecedents of ad avoidance, namely ethical judgment of social media ads and consumer perception of social media ads as controversial. Furthermore, it shows that ethical judgment serves as a moderator of the relationship between the perception of an ad as controversial and its avoidance.

The unexpected direction of the direct effect of ethical judgment on ad avoidance, as well as its moderation of the effect of negative ad perception on ad avoidance, indicate that the effect of ethical judgment over ad avoidance is more complex than previously hypothesized. This may be due to the effect of source factors and message appeals in controversial ads. For example, social marketing campaigns on social media may cause discomfort in viewers, but may not lead to social media ad avoidance due to their resonance with consumers' ethical judgments and moral values. This suggests consumers may find certain social media ad appeals uncomfortable, but may judge them acceptable if they are used for a good cause (e.g. for the communication of non-profit, social causes).

This study is original in that it empirically investigates the link between consumer avoidance of social media ads, controversial ad perception and consumer ethical judgment of social media ads. Thus, this work extends previous research in this area by advancing knowledge in the domain of advertising avoidance in a social media context, and by examining consumers in the UK. This research is also relevant to marketing practitioners, as it highlights the importance of evaluating consumer ethical judgment before running social media campaigns (Simpson et al. 1998), given that social media ad avoidance impacts social media ad effectiveness (Bellman et al. 2010; Pashkevich et al. 2012; Zufryden et al. 1993).

References Available Upon Request.