Generations X and Y Attitude towards Controversial Advertising

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Abstract

Segmentation has been useful in advertising decisions and subsequently the generation approach has emerged as a superior segmentation approach. The purpose of this article is to examine the attitudes of generation X and generation Y towards controversial advertising. Structured questionnaires were distributed throughout Malaysia, and a total of 768 usable questionnaires were obtained. Findings show that the two generational cohorts are significantly different in attitude towards controversial advertising. Generation X found the advertising of female contraceptives, feminine hygiene products, and funeral services to be more controversial, whereas generation Y found the advertising of alcoholic products, condoms, and gambling to be more of a controversy. In terms of the reasons of controversy, generation X found only health and safety issues to be more controversial whereas generation Y, hard sell, nudity, racist images, sexist images, and subject too personal. Future studies are therefore needed to validate the segregation of generations in Malaysia to secure effective marketing strategy.

Keywords: Generation X, Generation Y, Controversial advertising, Malaysia

Introduction

Marketing practitioners are continually confronted with the intricate task of advertising products/services to increasing diversified consumers in the marketplace. Hence it is paramount that the advertising communicates with the targeted ones effectively in order to yield favorable responses continually (Wells *et al.*, 2003). This is why market segmentation has been used extensively in advertising decisions (Kamakura and Wedel, 1995; Kaynak and Kara, 1996). The underlying principle is to target groups of consumers with homogeneous bonds since they are more likely to be identical in their response to advertising (Schewe and Meredith, 2004).

Although several segmentation strategies such as those based on demographic, geographic, and psychographic variables have been used (Kotler and Armstrong, 2011), an innovative and highly successful segmentation approach utilizing generational cohort, notably the Veterans, Baby-boomers, generation X and generation Y, organized by their respective birth years, is gradually being recognized (Meredith and Schewe, 2002). Even though generation cohorts may be viewed as just another useful demographic variable to create groups and describe segments, it actually goes beyond to unveil segment motivation. Generation cohorts also unveil values and lifestyle characteristics such as that of psychographics, but has superior tracking and forecasting ability due to its lifelong effect (Schewe and Meredith, 2004).

The purpose of this study is to examine the attitudes of Malaysians towards controversial advertising based on two generational cohorts, namely generation X, who is born between 1961 and 1980, and generation Y, who is born between 1981 and 2000. It is postulated that people from the same cohorts, regardless of the change in life stages, will have similar attitudinal patterns towards the said advertising, thus extending the understanding of consumers and enhancing the predictability of their future responses. The relationship between cohorts will provide additional clarification to the past knowledge on consumer behaviour. The implication of generational cohort in the Malaysian context will also be elucidated.

Literature Review

Generational Cohort

Generational cohorts are groups of people who are born during the same time period, and go through similar experiences of external events. These shared experiences affect their beliefs, attitudes and purchasing behavior in ways that remain with them over their entire lifetime (Ryder, 1965; Meredith and Schewe, 1994). Such segmentation is particularly useful because it provides a long standing solution to understanding consumers. As cohorts age and enter into new life stages, they will bring along their value systems, needs and wants with them (Holbrook and Schindler, 1989; Schuman and Scott, 1989; Hauck and Stanforth, 2007).

The concept of generational cohort has been discussed widely in many disciplines, including business (Mannheim, 1952; Rodgers, 1982; Mason and Fienberg, 1985; Rogler, 2002; Glenn, 2005). A good amount of studies have been done on linking work value to generational differences (Smola and Sutton, 2002; Cennamo and Gardner, 2008; Chen and Choi, 2008; Gursoy *et al.*, 2008). Many have concluded that such differences, especially in work values and expectations, are surreal between different cohorts in workforce (Yu and Miller, 2003; Cennamo and Gardner, 2008; D'Amato and Herzfeldt, 2008). Moreover, knowledge regarding to generational differences can help organizations predict the degree of receptivity and resistance of their workforce to planned corporate change and enhance the development of effective work relationships and organizational effectiveness (Jurkiewicz and Brown, 1998; Kupperschmidt, 2000).

Research has shown the potential of generational cohort in developing segmentation profile and implementing marketing strategies (Reynolds and Rentz, 1981; Meredith and Schewe, 1994; Schewe and Noble, 2000; Noble and Schewe, 2003). Generational labels such as leading-edge boomers, trailing-edge boomers and generation Xers are generally associated with marketing activities (Schewe and Noble, 2000; Noble and Schewe, 2003). It is considered as a basis for marketing practitioners to segment the consumers (Mittal *et al.*, 2008). For example, understanding cohorts is useful in developing marketing communication campaigns. Music, movie stars or icons that cohorts identified with from their coming-of-age years can be an effective means of directing communication messages to a given cohort (Noble and Schewe, 2003).

This study adapts two generation labels designated by Zemke *et al.* (2000): generation X and generation Y. The former is consisted of individuals born between 1961 and 1980, and the latter, who is also called Nexters or the Millennials, was born between 1981 and 2000 (Arsenault, 2003). Generation X is said to be born during the time of political and social instability (Moore and Carpenter, 2008). Hence they become skeptical about their future, and as a result they learn to survive, and are highly individualistic (Howe and Strauss, 1993). They are even entrepreneurial risk taker (de Meuse *et al.*, 2001). Moreover they tend to put personal freedom and challenging work ahead of job security and status (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Schewe and Meredith, 2004). Generation Y, in turn, tends to be very positive about their future because of economic and technological developments, especially in the advent of the internet (Boulds, 2000; Smola and Sutton, 2002; Schewe and Meredith, 2004). They witness the increase of diversity including ethnic, linguistic, non-traditional families, and dramatic change of media (Paul, 2001). Furthermore they tend to be uncertain spenders, having little brand loyalty and short-term wants (Pendergast, 2009). It is believed that all these characteristics of the two cohorts will help articulate attitude of Malaysians towards controversial advertising.

Controversial Advertising

Given the dynamism of the contemporary setting, managers and marketing practitioners have been employing fresh and creative methods in advertising in order to gain awareness, interest and desired response from the consumers (Jewler and Drewniany, 2001). As a result, images, slogans and themes which are potentially controversial are used and exploited (Waller, 1999; McIntyre, 2000; Waller, 2004). Due to its probable usefulness coupled with the rapid development in media, such exploitation has become increasingly common over the last three decades (Severn *et al.*, 1990; Pope *et al.*, 2004). However, it is also palpable that it can cause negative reactions or offence, and result in actions like negative publicity, receiving complaints, falling sales, and even product boycott (Fam and Waller, 2003). In spite of the concerns, marketing practitioners nowadays continue to seize every opportunity to draw attention boldly (Fogul, 2002).

Accordingly, many academic researchers began to investigate consumer attitudes towards controversial advertising based on different factors, such as gender, religion, and culture (Ricks, 1983; Luqmani *et al.*, 1987; Root, 1987; Terpstra, 1987; Cateora, 1990; Michell and Al-Mossawi, 1999; Phau and Prendergast, 2001; Prendergast *et al.*, 2002; Waller *et al.*, 2005; Fam *et al.*, 2009). Descriptions like “unmentionables”,

“offensive, intrusive, and irritating advertising”, “socially sensitive products”, “decent products”, “acceptable advertising” and “advertising ethics” were used to understand the subject matter (Bartos, 1981; Wilson and West, 1981; Aaker and Bruzzone, 1985; Rehman and Brooks, 1987; Triff *et al.*, 1987; Shao and Hill, 1994; Fahy *et al.*, 1995; Waller, 1999; Phau and Prendergast, 2001; Li *et al.*, 2002). Due to the prevalent use of controversial advertising with no sign of abatement, similar studies are also performed in Malaysia in recent years (Waller and Fam, 2000; Waller *et al.*, 2005; Munusamy and Wong, 2007; de Run *et al.*, 2010).

Controversial Products and Reasons

Two different aspects to controversial advertising, namely products and reasons or executions, are identified in past studies (Barnes and Dotson, 1990). In the same way, “the matter” (goods, services or ideas being advertised), and “the manner” (advertising executions) of the advertising are also investigated (Phau and Prendergast, 2001). To date researchers have come out with a list of 17 controversial products and 12 reasons (Waller and Fam, 2000; Waller *et al.*, 2005; de Run *et al.*, 2010). These products and reasons are adopted in this study. With alphabetical order, the products are alcohol, charities, cigarettes, condoms, female contraceptives, female hygiene products, female underwear, funeral services, gambling, guns and armaments, male underwear, pharmaceuticals, political parties, racially extremist groups, religious denominations, sexual diseases (AIDS, STD prevention), and weight loss programs. The reasons, in turn, are anti-social behavior, concern for children, hard sell, health and safety issues, indecent language, nudity, racist images, sexist images, stereotyping of people, subject too personal, violence and Western images.

The literatures aforementioned have shown the clear differences between the older generation as in generation X and the younger generation as in generation Y. Therefore it is inferred that there are differences in their attitude towards the two components of controversial advertising in its product and reason. Accordingly two hypotheses are formulated in this study for subsequent analysis. First, there is difference between generation X and generation Y for what is controversial, hence the following hypothesis:

H₁ : Generation X would find controversial advertising of products more controversial than Generation Y.

Secondly, there is difference between generation X and generation Y for why it is controversial, hence the following hypothesis:

H₂ : Generation X would find the reasons of controversy more controversial than Generation Y.

Methodology

In order to investigate the products and the reasons that are controversial for Malaysians when advertised, a structured-questionnaire was designed based on previous studies (Shao and Hill, 1994; Waller *et al.*, 2005; de Run *et al.*, 2010).

Purposive and snowball sampling strategies were used as only respondents who were born between 1961 and 2000 were sampled. They are the generation X and generation Y in Malaysia, and are now between 11 and 30 years old, and between 31 and 50 years old respectively (Zemke *et al.*, 2000). Questionnaire was distributed throughout Malaysia, and a total of 768 usable questionnaires were obtained and computed.

The questionnaire was part of a larger study but only sections related to this paper are discussed here. Part A contained questions on demographics. Part B contained a list of 17 products and Part C 12 reasons for respondents to determine levels of controversy. A five-point Likert type format where 1 = not at all controversial to 5 = extremely controversial was used. Data were analyzed using descriptive analysis and t-test.

Findings

Table 1 depicts a summation of respondents' demographic information. Age is used to indicate which cohorts the respondents belong to. Mean scores for controversy of the advertising in the components of the products and the reason is shown in Table 2.

Table 1: Respondent Demographics

Variable		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	365	47.5
	Female	403	52.5
Age cohort	Generation Y (11 - 30)	505	65.8
	Generation X (31 - 50)	263	34.2
Religion	Muslim	445	57.9
	Buddhist	166	21.6
	Christian	136	17.7
	Hindu	9	1.2

Findings of the t-test analysis based on the two generational cohorts are also incorporated into Table 2. For controversial products, there was statistically difference between the two cohorts on alcoholic products, condoms, female contraceptives, feminine hygiene products, funeral services, gambling, and pharmaceuticals. Comparatively, generation X found the advertising of female contraceptives, feminine hygiene products, funeral services, and pharmaceuticals to be more controversial, whereas generation Y found the advertising of alcoholic products, condoms, and gambling to be more of a controversy.

Hence the testing of the first hypothesis was found to be partially acceptable as not all the products tested were seen as more controversial by generation X over that of generation Y. Seven products were found to be significantly different between generations but only four were seen as more controversial by generation X.

Table 2: Means & t-test for Controversial Advertising by Generational Cohort

Variables	Overall		Gen Y		Gen X	
	Mean	S. D	Mean	S. D	Mean	S. D
Alcoholic products**	3.48	1.48	3.60	1.45	3.24	1.53
Charities/Fund raising	2.22	1.00	2.18	1.05	2.31	0.89
Cigarettes/tobacco	3.19	1.27	3.22	1.30	3.14	1.23
Condoms**	3.38	1.29	3.50	1.28	3.14	1.26
Female Contraceptives*	3.33	1.37	3.25	1.36	3.50	1.38
Female Underwear	3.30	1.32	3.30	1.36	3.29	1.23
Feminine Hygiene Products**	3.17	1.24	3.08	1.30	3.33	1.12
Funeral Services**	3.01	1.52	2.78	1.50	3.45	1.46
Gambling**	3.34	1.27	3.44	1.32	3.14	1.13
Guns & Armaments	2.97	1.34	2.91	1.40	3.08	1.20
Male Underwear	3.24	1.36	3.22	1.39	3.27	1.31
Pharmaceuticals**	2.45	1.46	2.29	1.43	2.76	1.46
Political Parties	2.58	1.36	2.54	1.34	2.66	1.39
Racially Extremist Groups	3.41	1.32	3.34	1.38	3.52	1.20
Religious Denominations	2.99	1.22	2.96	1.28	3.03	1.08
Sexual Diseases	3.05	1.41	3.06	1.47	3.05	1.29
Weight Loss Programs	2.38	1.19	2.35	1.27	2.42	1.04

* t-test significant at .05, ** t-test significant at .00

In terms of reasons for being controversial, there was statistically difference on concern for children, hard sell, health and safety issues, indecent language, nudity, racist images, sexist images, and subject too personal. Comparatively, generation X found just health and safety issues to be more controversial, whereas Generation Y found concern for children, hard sell, nudity, indecent language, racist and sexist images, and subject too personal to be more controversial. Findings of the t-test analysis by generational cohort are also incorporated into Table 3.

Hence the testing of the second hypothesis was found to be partially acceptable as not all the reasons tested were seen as more controversial by generation X over that of generation Y. Eight reasons were found to be significantly different between generations but only one was seen as more controversial by generation X.

Table 3: Means & t-test for reasons for Controversy by Generational Cohort

Variable	Overall		Gen Y		Gen X	
	Mean	S. D	Mean	S. D	Mean	S. D
Anti-social Behaviour	2.94	1.25	2.92	1.28	2.97	1.19
Concern for Children*	2.75	1.34	2.83	1.35	2.60	1.29
Hard Sell*	3.23	1.25	3.30	1.29	3.10	1.16
Health & Safety Issues**	2.90	1.35	2.71	1.34	3.29	1.27
Indecent Language**	3.13	1.24	3.33	1.30	2.75	1.01
Nudity**	3.50	1.35	3.70	1.34	3.11	1.27
Racist Images*	3.23	1.32	3.31	1.36	3.06	1.24
Sexist Images**	3.35	1.23	3.46	1.25	3.16	1.16
Stereotyping of People	3.08	1.26	3.14	1.31	2.97	1.16
Subject too Personal**	3.32	1.22	3.41	1.21	3.14	1.21
Violence	3.37	1.25	3.43	1.26	3.27	1.22
Western Images	3.37	1.29	3.42	1.30	3.26	1.27

* t-test significant at .05, ** t-test significant at .00

Discussions

The results indicate a very appealing outlook on how generation shapes and affects the attitudes towards controversial advertising in its bare component of the products and the reasons. First, it must be said that Malaysians can indeed be segmented into different generational cohorts because their dissimilarities are shown in their attitudes towards controversial advertising. This validates the past studies on the implication of generational cohort in marketing in various countries. (Excousseau, 2000; Meredith and Schewe, 2002; Schewe and Meredith, 2004; Hung *et al.*, 2007; Motta and Schewe, 2008). This also highlights the fact that using cohort as a basis to segment the consumers is useful in developing goods and services because they can be more aligned with the consumers' needs and wants (Mittal *et al.*, 2008).

From the testing of hypothesis it appears that generation Y is sensitive towards the advertising of controversial products and has shown stronger sensitivity to a variety of reasons as to why the advertising of products are controversial. Both hypotheses are only partially accepted, and this indicates that while the older generation has different views as to what is controversial, the younger generation has developed its own strong views.

Female contraceptive and hygiene products are found controversial in both generations X and Y because these products are still perceived as something sensitive and secretive today. Additionally, religion must have played an important role because Muslims, along with other religious groups, continue to uphold modesty in their teachings (de Run *et al.*, 2010). Specifically, the advertising of these two products is found to be more controversial in generation X because the level of exposure to them in 1970s was very minimal. Communicational and digital technologies were not in place in many parts of Malaysia during those times.

Moreover, middle-aged Malaysians today are more cautious or skeptical in their characteristics due to their social upbringing.

Funeral services, in turn, always maintain as a grave matter to all Malaysians (Waller and Fam, 2000). This explains why the older ones in generation X found it controversial. However the findings in relation to generation Y may infer something different. Younger generation is becoming less interested and bound by family's tradition, superstition and culture as diversity in ethnics and non-traditional families continues to grow. They could even see the advertising of funeral service as a good thing because it facilitates awareness and adoption process.

Interestingly, in spite of the fact that the advertising of alcoholic products, condoms, and gambling is becoming more apparent as a result of the advancement of media, generations X and Y still consider them controversial, with the younger ones finding them to be more controversial. This is most likely because Muslims, who make up the highest percentage of religious group in the population of Malaysia, recognize *Sharia* laws, and the general public are becoming more and more aware of the regulations enforced by Malaysian government to safeguard these advertisements (Waller and Fam, 2000; de Run *et al.*, 2010). Another noteworthy finding is that both cohorts found racially extremist group to be controversial. This supports the findings of Waller (2005), and Fam and Waller (2003) in their respective cross-cultural studies. Since Malaysia is a multi-racial and cultural country, Malaysians have relatively learnt, through past experiences and education, the importance of maintaining harmony between races.

As far as the reasons for being controversial are concerned, the findings show a very one-sided phenomenon in generation Y, which nearly defeats the second hypothesis. Generation X found only health and safety issues to be more controversial but generation Y found concern for children, hard sell, indecent language, nudity, racist and sexist images, and subject too personal to be more controversial. As expected, living through the period of instability, most remarkably the times of social insecurity, where discrepancies between races and opportunities were often the issues at hand, have caused generation X to be more individualistic and cautious in their lives and works. Although they also found hard sell, nudity, subject too personal, racist and sexist images to be controversial based on the means scores, the responses are not as strong as that of generation Y.

For generation Y, despite the rapid development in media, especially the internet, it is apparent that the regulations on the contents and executions in advertisement stipulated by the governing bodies, such as the Advertising Code in Malaysia are still prevailing (Deng *et al.*, 1994). Although younger generation may be more receptive to incessant exposure from various advertisements, they are still aware of the potential negativity that these executions may generate in an increasing diverse community. The findings commensurate with the study conducted by Fam and Waller (2003) where Malaysians with the average age of 21 perceived racist and sexist images, and nudity as the top three reasons of controversy. Lastly, the controversies instigated by indecent language, hard sell and subject too personal imply that the younger generation is becoming more collective in their behavior.

It is necessary to take note again that seeing the advertising controversial is not necessary a bad thing. Marketing practitioners can continue promote their controversial but lawful products in such a way that it generates consumers' interest and minimizes distrust. At the same time, consumers may become more aware of and familiar with a certain products due to its controversial element. When considering the characteristics of generation Y, such as uncertain in what they want and spend, and highly exposed to media, this may provide another viewpoint as to why the younger generation found a good number of products and reasons to be more controversial than the older generation. From the managerial standpoint, this demonstrates the potential in utilizing controversial advertising to capture generation Y, but it also discloses the complexity in grasping the needs and wants of the younger ones. For example, a young non-Muslim may find the advertising of alcoholic products to be controversial and the use of indecent language as a cause of controversy because he knows what are the norms and regulations in the community that he lives in. Nevertheless it does not mean he has not consumed beer and sworn at others, and will not perform these behaviors in the future. Neither does it mean he has been offended and would not have favorable behavior towards the product. On the contrary, the perceived controversy may become subject of a talk, and end up having more people interested in the advertisement and the product. Studies have shown that advertising can even be something entertaining (Pollay and Mittal, 1993; Korgaonkar *et al.*, 2001), and it may be the case with generation Y when viewing controversial advertising. Generation Y does not inherit everything from generation X, nor are they becoming more conventional due to their sensitivity towards controversial advertising, particularly the reasons of controversy. It just shows the unpredictability and intricate change of attitudes in generation Y or the younger ones today.

Overall, the findings reveal that the reason for being controversial is a stronger indicator of controversy than the product itself. In other words consumers are generally more concerned with the execution of the advertisement than the matter or the product itself (Prendergast *et al.*, 2002). While generation X views the products to be generally more controversial, generation Y considers the reasons to be more of a controversy. This further shows the complexity in the younger ones.

Conclusion

It is essential at the foremost to identify the products that are controversial to different groups of people. It is equally important to know the reasons for being controversial so that the execution of the advertisements can be fittingly implemented. Notwithstanding its usefulness in capturing attention, Dahl *et al.* (2003) pointed out that controversial advertising can turn into offensive when it becomes something that violates the norm of the society. Therefore marketing practitioners have to know the perception of the public towards their products, identify their targeted segment, and execute the advertisements wisely to secure desired results, thus preventing unwanted outcomes.

This study validates the magnitude of understanding generational cohorts in order to make the products effectively appealing to the consumers through meticulous design of the products and advertising executions. On the whole it exemplifies the use of cohort in generations X and Y in the Malaysian context to identify the different

attitudes that they have towards controversial advertising. Moreover it indicates a significant change of attitude in generation Y towards the level of controversy between the products and the reasons. It is therefore surmised that recognizing the homogeneity within cohorts and the heterogeneity between cohorts can enhance the understanding of consumers and the subsequent segmentation strategy. It can also allow better forecasting of future responses of the consumers from the same generational cohorts (Schewe and Meredith, 2004).

It is believed that future research should be conducted to validate the segregation of generational cohorts in Malaysia because labels such as generations X and Y are borrowed from that of the West. The forming of these cohorts and the relationships between cohorts can thus be further explored and investigated to underpin the understanding of the Malaysian consumers and the implementation of segmentation and marketing mix. Moreover generation study can be applied on specific controversial or non-controversial advertisements in order to examine consumers' attitude towards specific products. Furthermore, since Malaysia is a country endowed with diversity of races, a cross racial and cultural study can be done to gain more insights on the implication of race, religion and cultural values on the formation of generational cohort.

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