

# The Consumer Responses toward the Offensive Product Advertising

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**Abstract**—The main purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of animation in offensive product advertising. Experiment was conducted to collect consumer responses toward animated and static ads of offensive and non-offensive products. The study was conducted by distributing questionnaires to the target respondents. According to statistics from Innovative Internet Research Center, Thailand, majority of internet users are 18 – 44 years old. The results revealed an interaction between ad design and offensive product. Specifically, when used in offensive product advertisements, animated ads were not effective for consumer attention, but yielded positive response in terms of attitude toward product. The findings support that information processing model is accurate in predicting consumer cognitive response toward cartoon ads, whereas U&G, arousal, and distinctive theory is more accurate in predicting consumer affective response. In practical, these findings can also be used to guide ad designers and marketers that are suitable for offensive products.

**Keywords**—Animation, banner ad design, consumer responses, offensive product advertising, stock exchange of Thailand.

## I. INTRODUCTION

While previous research studies found various positive impacts of animation in the ads, the information processing theory, on the other hand, suggests different perspectives of animation's possible effects. Since the processability of a message imposes degrees of cognition load on how individuals obtain information, it may impact the effectiveness of the learning process. Therefore, since the movement of animation requires more mental efforts to process, the use of animation in advertisements could be perceived as burdensome in consumer information processing endeavor, and may lower the effectiveness of the ads [1]. In addition, this theory proposes that individuals have limitations in the amount of information they can acquire, they tend to have selective attention and choose to obtain only information that is related or appropriate to them. Since consumers might not think that it is appropriate for them to process information regarding offensive products, which are the products that they are not supposed to like, the effects of animation in the offensive product advertisements may also be different from those of non-offensive products. Is animation effective for advertising offensive products? Are animated ads more effective than static ads? If animated ads are effective, do they work well for all types of products or are they most effective

for certain types such as offensive products? The present study attempts to answer these questions through experimentation by investigating consumer reactions to advertisements for both offensive and non-offensive products and the manipulation of banner advertising. As the first research study that investigates the effects of animation on consumer's responses towards offensive product advertising, the results of this study provide beneficial contributions to the study of consumer behavior towards advertising designs, especially on how much existing theory such as information processing can explain the phenomenon. This new knowledge could also be applied to other groups of Internet users or other types of advertising designs that involve animation. Moreover, for practical implications, advertisers and advertising designers can apply the results of this study to create the most effective online banner ads that best suit the types of products being advertised, especially for designing banner advertising to promote sensitive or offensive products. In addition, related parties, such as organizations in the government sector, can apply these results to regulate the advertising of harmful products, such as cigarettes and alcoholic drinks, which have animation in the ads.

From a review of literature regarding offensive products and consumer responses toward advertising design, the gaps and issues that have still not been fully explored motivate this study. First, since small numbers of the previous studies have analyzed the impact of banner advertising design on offensive products, the impact of different advertising design elements on offensive products has been inadequately investigated. In the overall picture, this study therefore clarifies the relationships between the independent factors, which are offensive product advertising; the moderators, which are the animation ad designs; and the dependent variables, which are the consumer responses. By using an experimental design, this study can identify the effects of animation on various types of consumer responses toward offensive product advertising. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to identify the type of design (using animation in banner advertising) that was the most effective for offensive products and non-offensive products [2].

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Offensive Product

There are some studies, albeit limited in number, which have been conducted to explore offensive, sensitive, or controversial products. For example, in 1990, the investigated

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the nature of offensive television advertising and found that the offence caused by some products is dictated by social norms, and is most likely to occur in products that are considered taboo [3].

### 1. Definitions of Offensive and Controversial Products

In general, the word offensive is defined as “arousing a visceral reaction of disgust, anger, or hatred” and as “causing displeasure or resentment”. Despite the studies regarding types of products or advertising which can be considered offensive or controversial, the definitions used to define these types of products are still unclear. Although the meanings are similar, there are inconsistencies in the terms being used to categorize these types of products. For example, some studies use the term “offensive products” whereas some other studies employ the terms “controversial products” or sensitive products.

Although different terms were used, these studies all refer to similar types of products. In their literature reviews, none of these papers provided a direct meaning of the terms being used; instead, they referred the meaning of the terms to the concept of another well-known term, “unmentionables”. The term “unmentionables” was defined by “products, services, or concepts that for reasons of delicacy, decency, morality, or even fear tend to elicit reactions of distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage when mentioned or when openly presented”. The meaning of the unmentionables was further redefined by any products/services/concepts that are considered offensive, embarrassing, harmful, socially unacceptable or controversial to a large group of the population.

For the categories of products and services covered under these definitions, the lists have been changed and updated over time. To identify offensive products, the research conducted in Malaysia by provided lists of products considered offensive in their specific research areas. Although the lists differed in their ranking orders due to differences of the cultural background of each region, there were a lot of similarities among the items represented in the lists [4]. The products that were most likely to be perceived as offensive were condoms and contraceptive products, undergarments, hygiene products, funeral services, sexual services, and alcoholic drinks. Beside the product categories, the terms being used to categorize these types of products are not fixed and are exchangeable within the literature reviews of different studies. The products and services covered by these terms are also highly overlapped. Regarding the frequency of usage, the terms “controversial products” and “offensive Products” have been used somewhat more often in previous research studies than other terms. The term “controversial products” is used frequently in business-related research articles. Besides “controversial products”, the term “offensive products” is also used as frequently in business articles and research papers.

### 2. Offensive and Controversial Advertising

Besides products and services, the terms “controversial” and “offensive” are also used to describe advertising which

causes negative feelings to the audience. For advertisers, 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”. It has been suggested by previous studies that a number of products, both goods and services, are considered controversial when advertised, including alcohol, cigarettes, underwear, contraceptives, and political advertising. In 1990, the investigated the nature of offensive television advertising and found that the offence caused by some products was dictated by social norms, and was most likely to occur in products that were considered taboo. Looking at this topic in more detail, the explained that offensive advertising was an act and/or a process that violates the norm, and includes messages that disobey laws and customs, abuse a moral or social code, or insult the moral or physical senses. The proposed that “offensive advertising” had two components: 1) the products perceived to be offensive by potential consumers, and 2) the advertising execution, which may or may not relate to the product being represented in the advertisement [5].

In terms of the effects of offensive advertising, there are studies that disclosed disadvantages or backfire effects of using attention-grabbing offensive advertising. The studied Benetton’s offensive advertising campaign in Germany and found that although such ads generated high brand awareness, Benetton’s brand image was dramatically weakened. Likewise, a study by revealed that consumers were less likely to purchase products from the brands using offensive advertising.

Another important consideration for researchers regarding offensive advertising is the term being used to describe this type of advertising. For many researchers, the term being selected are consistent with those previously used in their own research studies. Research studies conducted by their colleagues always use “controversial products” and “controversial ads”.

### *B. Theories Related to Consumer Responses Toward Advertising*

Although there are several models of consumer response, there currently exist no standardized models for assessing consumer responses toward advertisements. Therefore, will discuss models and theories related to the measurement of consumer responses toward advertisements [14].

#### *C. The Hierarchy of Effects and Related Models*

The Hierarchy of Effects model was created by this model shows how advertising works through a series of steps from awareness of product or service to actual purchase. The Hierarchy of Effects model is one of the most common tools used by many companies to measure the effectiveness of their advertising campaigns [15].

In this model, the responses are separated into six different effects which can be grouped into three types of responses: cognition, affect, and behavior. It also clearly suggests a

causal relationship from cognition to affect and from affect to behavior (conation).

However, there are several arguments against the Hierarchy of Effects model. The claimed that this model did not work well in all cases, and that it was only applicable to certain product categories, specific groups of customers, and some points in time. Since the model assumes the effects are sequential, it is important to know that these steps can be applied to specific products, customer groups, and periods of time. For example, for some of the low involvement products, consumers may purchase the product without having any emotional bond with it. Similar to the Hierarchy of Effects model, the Model of Cognitive Response also describes the types of responses evoked by an advertising message and how those responses relate to consumer attitudes toward the ad and brand as well as their purchase intentions, while the term "cognitive responses" is used to refer to the thoughts that occur to a customer when reading, viewing, and/or hearing an advertising communication [6].

This model illustrates that after being exposed to advertising, the person who receives the message will produce cognitions in response to the stimuli which are: 1) product/message thoughts, 2) source-oriented thoughts, and 3) ad execution thoughts. These thoughts will then generate the receivers' attitudes toward the advertisement and the brand. Eventually, the two attitudes will combine to form the purchase intention of the receiver.

In addition to the Hierarchy of Effects model and the Model of Cognitive Response, there are three more models which also divide consumer responses into 3 stages or 3 types which are: AIDA (attention, interest, desire, and action) [16] that was developed to depict the stages in the personal selling process; the Innovation Adoption model which describes the stages a consumer passes through in the process of adopting a new product and the Information Processing model [17]. That is a model of the process through which a consumer must pass to be influenced by advertising [13].

By dividing consumer responses into 3 types, we can compare the elements of each stage of consumer response of each model as shown. Besides the similarity of how these models sequence the responses into three stages, these models also propose that the cognitive process occurs as step-by-step effects before the affective response, which suggests that the cognitive response mediates between the advertisement and attitudes. However, the causal relationships among the three stages are debatable, as they could be applied to some products or situations but not to all. This study, therefore, did not use these sequences in this current study because the experiment involves many products [7].

### III. METHODOLOGY

The respondents of this pilot study were selected from this pool of population profile. The questionnaires were designed to collect the information regarding the respondent's offensive feeling toward the online advertising of offensive products, as

well as purchase involvement levels. The questionnaire was designed to collect demographic data, including age, gender, income, education level, working status and marital status. The demographic data can be used to find the influence of demographic characteristics and the offensive feeling and purchase involvement. The example of this questionnaire design is attached to this report [8].

The research conceptual framework is shown in Fig. 1.



Fig. 1 Research Conceptual Framework

### IV. FINDINGS

#### A. Manipulation Checks

Offensive feeling towards products were assessed by the scale used by previous studies regarding offensive or controversial products. Respondents were instructed to rate their offensive feelings towards online advertising of these products on the Likert-scale of 1 = "Not at all" to 5 = "Extremely Offensive". The scales used passed reliability test at Cronbach's alpha .749. Based on the t-test results reported in the levels of offensiveness of the offensive products used in the experiment (anti-acne product and mouthwash) are significantly higher than those of the non-offensive products used (facial tissues and laptop computer) ( $M = 2.11$  versus  $1.38$ , respectively;  $p < .05$ ).

TABLE I  
MANIPULATION CHECK RESULTS

Product Types	N	Involvement Level			t-test Results		
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	p-value	df
Offensive	92	2.11	0.644	.109	-6.280	0.21	182
Non-offensive	92	1.38	0.907	.113			

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) followed by mean comparisons were used to test the hypotheses of this study. Based on IPM, Hypothesis 1 predicts interactions between ad design and product category on consumer cognitive responses towards the ads. H1(a) states that in comparison to static ads, animated ads produce more favorable attention for non-offensive products than offensive products. The results in Tables II and III indicate a cross-over interaction effect between ad design and product category ( $F(1, 179) = 13.900$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Mean comparisons reported in Table II and graphically shown in reveal that, for consumer attention, animated ads yield significantly more favorable responses than static ads for non-offensive products ( $M = 3.01$  versus  $2.14$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Conversely, when the product is offensive, animated ads produce less favorable effects than static ads ( $M = 1.97$  versus  $2.79$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Therefore, H1(a) is supported. Hypothesis 1(b) states that, in comparison to static ads, animated ads lead to higher comprehension of non-

offensive products than offensive products. The results in Table III indicate no significant interaction effect between ad design and product category. Therefore, H1(b) is not supported.

TABLE II  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS (MEANS AND SDs) FOR COGNITIVE MEASURES BY AD DESIGN AND PRODUCT CATEGORY

Variables	Static		Animated	
	Non-offensive Products (n=46)	Offensive Products (n=46)	Non-offensive Products (n=46)	Offensive Products (n=46)
Attention	2.14 (1.35)	2.78 (1.66)	3.01 (1.64)	1.97 (1.13)
Comprehension	.97 (.72)	1.00 (.67)	.94 (.74)	.89 (.38)

Hypothesis 2 states that, in comparison to static ads, animated ads produce higher credibility (H2a), more favourable attitude towards the brand (H2b), and more favourable attitude towards the brand (H2c), for non-offensive products than for offensive products. The results in Table V show no significant interaction effect between ad design and product category on credibility and attitude towards the brand. Thus, H2 (a) and H2 (b) are not supported.

For H2(c), the results in Table V indicate that the interaction between ad design and product category is significant in terms of attitude towards product  $F(1, 179) = 4.601$ ,  $p < .05$ ). As shown in Table IV and the mean comparison shows that when compared to offensive product, static ads are significantly more effective for non-offensive product ( $M = 3.56$  versus  $2.86$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, for animated ads, no significant difference was found when used in both types of products. Therefore H2(c) is not supported as the results are not in the expected direction.

In contrast, based on U&G, arousal, and distinctive theories, Hypothesis 3 predicts interactions between ad design and product category on consumer cognitive responses towards the ads that in comparison to static ads, animated ads produce more favourable attention (H3a) and comprehension (H3b) for offensive products than no offensive products. As reported in H1(a), the results in Table III indicate a cross-over

interaction effect between ad design and product category ( $F(1,179)=13.900$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, the mean comparisons reported in Table II reveal opposite directions of the effects of animation in the ads as predicted by H3(a). Therefore, H3(a) is not supported. Also, for H3(b), the results in Table III indicate no significant interaction effect between ad design and product category. Therefore, H3(b) is not supported.

TABLE III  
MANOVA RESULT: EFFECTS OF AD DESIGN AND PRODUCT CATEGORY ON COGNITIVE RESPONSES

	df	Attention			Comprehension		
		MS	F	p	MS	F	p
Ad design	1	.113	.013	.91	.209	.400	.53
Product	1	6.870	.766	.38	.008	.015	.90
Product x Ad design	1	124.703	13.900	.00*	.069	.132	.72
Error	179	8.971			.522		

TABLE IV  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS (MEANS AND SDs) FOR AFFECTIVE MEASURES BY AD DESIGN AND PRODUCT CATEGORY

Variables	Static		Animated	
	Non-offensive Products (n=46)	Offensive Products (n=46)	Non-offensive Products (n=46)	Offensive Products (n=46)
Credibility	3.26 (1.42)	2.46 (1.25)	3.02 (1.23)	2.68 (1.01)
Attitude towards Brand	3.23 (.81)	3.31 (1.21)	2.96 (1.32)	2.79 (1.17)
Attitude towards Product	3.56 (1.06)	2.86 (1.20)	3.29 (1.16)	3.34 (1.27)

Nonetheless, the significant interaction effect between ad design and product category on attitude towards product was found as also reported in Table V, and discussed in H2(c). As shown in Table IV and, when the product is non-offensive, static ads produce more favourable attitude towards product than animated ads ( $M = 3.56$  versus  $3.29$ ), whereas animated ads yielded more favourable attitude towards product than static ads ( $M = 3.34$  versus  $2.86$ ). Therefore, H4(c) is supported [9].

TABLE V  
MANOVA RESULT: EFFECTS OF AD DESIGN AND PRODUCT CATEGORY ON AFFECTIVE RESPONSES

	df	Credibility			Attention			Comprehension		
		MS	F	p	MS	F	p	MS	F	p
Ad design	1	.024	.004	.95	63.125	5.147	.02*	4.545	.365	.55
Product	1	57.416	9.379	.00**	1.038	.085	.77	42.589	3.422	.07
Product x Ad design	1	9.682	1.582	.21	6.039	.492	.48	57.268	4.601	.03*
Error	180	6.122			12.265			12.447		

## V. CONCLUSION

The results reported in this study reveal the effects of animation in the advertising of offensive and non-offensive products. The main findings indicate that when compared to static ads, animated ads yield less favourable cognitive response in terms of attention, but more favourable affective responses in terms of attitude towards product when the

product is offensive. In contrast, for non-offensive products, the use of animation in advertisements leads to more favourable cognitive response in terms of attention, but less favourable response in terms of attitudes towards the product. In other words, animation is effective for increasing: 1) favourable attitude towards product for offensive products advertising, and 2) consumer attention towards non-offensive product advertising [10].



The different effects of animated ads for offensive and non-offensive products could be explained by the different degrees of mental process that consumers may engage towards these two different types of products; they are in line with the IP notions of automaticity and cognitive load theory. The movement of animation, as stimuli, require more mental effort to be processed; they involve less automaticity and more cognitive loads for the information processing in human memory. Moreover, due to the limited resources of sensory memory, when the product is offensive, less attention is paid to the ads as humans tend to avoid things that are considered offensive or irrelevant. Since degrees of cognitive load and selective attention may impact the effectiveness of the learning process, the use of animation in offensive product advertisements may be burdensome for consumer information processing and, therefore, may lead to the ads being less effective. The study findings showed that animation in the advertisements of offensive products generate lower attention among adults. It can be assumed that adult audiences would not prefer to pay attention to animated ads, especially when the products are not offensive to them. On the other hand, for non-offensive products, consumers may be more willing to pay attention, as the products do not offend them or causing them the negative feelings. Thus, animation as stimuli in ads of non-offensive products may contribute to enhance cognitive responses such as attention [11].

The finding that animated ads have negative effects on the cognitive components (attention) of offensive products, but have positive effects on affective response (attitude towards product) also appears to be partially in line with the two-component model (TCM).

This model suggests that there are two components of somatosensory experiences of pain and pleasure: informational and emotional reactions it proposes that the cognitive component is more prominent when distraction is low. Because movement in animation distracts audience from the ad content, animated ads clearly create more distraction than static ads especially in offensive product advertising which require a greater information processing effort as viewers try to avoid the products in the ads. Such a distraction may not be as relevant for non-offensive products [12].

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to thank Assoc. Prof. Dr. Luedech Girdwichai, The President of Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Bangkok, Thailand for financial support. Also, the author would like to thank to Asst. Prof. Dr. Prateep Wajeetongratana, the Dean of Faculty of Management Science for the full support in this research.

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