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## Article

# Shockvertising of luxurious fast-foods brands in emerging markets: Differential effects of consumer demographic profiles

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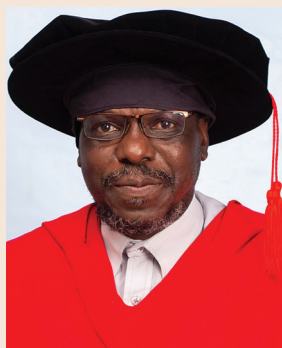
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## MARKETING | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Shockvertising of luxurious fast-foods brands in emerging markets: Differential effects of consumer demographic profiles

Paul Mukucha<sup>1</sup> and Divaries Cosmas Jaravaza<sup>1\*</sup>

**Abstract:** The serendipitous emergence of social media at the turn of this century created new uncensored avenues for the advertising industry. This created conditions conducive to peddling controversial ads or shockvertising. Controversial ads came as a result of the need to breakthrough the advertising clutter. The pervasiveness of controversial ads created mixed feelings among the audience. In order to avoid offending some target markets, advertisers are now faced with a daunting task of channeling their controversial ads to the target market groups that are likely to respond favorably. This study therefore seeks to determine the differential effects of controversial advertisements across various demographic groups. A sample of 1200 respondents was surveyed from one of the leading fast-food restaurants that regularly flight controversial ads laced with sexual humor in Zimbabwe. The data were analyzed using factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA). The study revealed that in general shockvertising was well appreciated across all demographic groups studied. There were some differential effects of age and marital status on the ad evaluation. However, there were no differential effects on gender, religion, and levels of education on ad evaluation. The study recommended the use of



Divaries Cosmas Jaravaza

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Divaries Cosmas Jaravaza and Dr Paul Mukucha are working on several projects on luxury fast-food brands, contraception, and social and health-care marketing. There is a particular thrust on HIV/AIDS, women, and culture. The studies are done in subsistence markets in sub-Saharan Africa, and the authors can forge collaborations with researchers in other countries for cross-cultural studies in transformative consumer research as well as in entrepreneurship, supply chain management, branding, and indigenous knowledge systems.

## PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

There is a plethora of advertisements which compete for consumers' attention in the market place. Censorship of advertisements has been greatly compromised due to the growth of social media tools and its adoption by consumers. Advertisers have been creative enough to produce sexually explicit advertisements (shockvertising). This study investigated the differences between the young and elderly, male and female, single and married, followers of African religion and Christians, and the highly educated and the less educated in terms of the appreciation of controversial advertisements (sexually explicit ads). Results revealed that there were significant differences with regard to age and marital status, but no differences were noted on gender, religion, and level of education in the sub-Saharan context. Therefore, advertisers can produce controversial ads targeting the youth and those who are single for optimum attention.

controversial ads as they can manage to cut through the information clutter. Advertisers, however, should emphasize more on the youth and the single consumers since they appreciate controversial ads more than other demographic groups.

**Subjects:** Consumer Psychology; Marketing Communications; Marketing Communications; Consumer Behaviour

**Keywords:** shockvertising; controversial ads; information clutter; social media; consumer erotophilia; fast-food brands; emerging markets

## 1. Introduction

The prevalence of advertising clutter is well documented in the extant literature (Ha, 2017; Muda et al., 2012; Subramanian, 2015). In response to the bloated advertising arena, advertisers then try to breakthrough the clutter through creativity. Some advertisers globally have created sexually explicit ads to attract the attention of their target consumers (Bushman & Bonacci, 2002). The expectation would be that sexually explicit ad content attracts attention on biological basis. However, culture has a fundamental role in shaping consumer sexuality (Abdolmanafi et al., 2018), and this influences the degree of attention they may devote to shockvertising. Classic studies by Geert Hofstede revealed differences in cultural values across countries and regions (Hofstede, 2009); hence, consumer perceptions of shockvertising cannot be universal but depend on the mind in a unique cultural context.

The fast-food restaurant industry is one of the most resilient economic sectors that have been able to withstand all kinds of disruptions. Perhaps, this is due to the fact that fast-food has become another staple food in Zimbabwe (Mukucha & Jaravaza, 2021). This has seen almost every street in most urban areas having a couple of fast-food restaurants. The increase in the number of fast-food restaurants resulted in fierce competition that has seen most operators resorting to unconventional methods of marketing campaigns, such as controversial advertising. Controversial advertising which is also known as shockvertising is described as an attention grabbing technique that leverages on potentially sensitive social issues (Belch & Belch, 2009) such as sexual humor (Maliszewski et al., 2019) in order to break the information clutter (Kadic-Maglajlic et al., 2017). In this study, the terms controversial advertising and shockvertising are used interchangeably.

Controversial advertisement can take the form of advertising products that are controversial in nature (Moraes et al., 2016) or the use of controversial execution of advertisements (Chan et al., 2007). Controversial advertisements have become common for products regarded as controversial in nature, such as contraceptives, underwear, and hygiene products (Gurrieri et al., 2016). In some communities, what is regarded as controversial has been unanimous to the extent that consumers had to boycott controversially advertised products (Singh & Chahal, 2019). However, this has never been the case in the Zimbabwean society where heterogeneous views are the order of the day on almost anything. Thus, marketers have been peddling controversial advertisements, without full knowledge of the demographic groups that are likely to embrace them. The most common type of controversial ads in Zimbabwe depicts sexual humor that leverages on trending sex scandals through provocative images and catchy tag-lines. The controversy ranges from sexuality, nudity, and decency to morality dimension. These themes are likely to invoke mixed reactions among the target audience, ranging from distaste, outrage, or disgust reactions in one extreme to entertainment, funny feelings, and enjoyment on the other extreme.

Generally, controversial ads are shunned in the mainstream media due to the need to adhere to national laws, industry ethical guidelines, and editorial policies (Singh & Chahal, 2019). However, the emergence of free-play social media opened up serendipitous opportunities for various advertisers to flight ads of their choice (Filopulos et al., 2016). Thus, controversial ads have found a natural habitat in social media (Sabri, 2017) due to their ability to cross legal, cultural, and

geographical barriers (Moraes et al., 2017). Social media has limited censorship of any content it publishes (Slutskiy, 2020).

It is a fact that not all audiences are prone to liking controversial ads, and their effectiveness is not guaranteed across diverse populations (Perry et al., 2013). A search in the extant literature did not reveal any study that has sought to determine the appeal of controversial ads across various demographic factors save for a study by Barnes and Dotson (1990) which was done over three decades ago in a different cultural context. Since previous research has already revealed that controversy is not static, a replication of previous studies over time is necessary. This gap in the literature whose relevance is of empirical and practical significance needs to be filled. Therefore, this study seeks to determine the demographic groups that are prone to favorably react to shockvertising. More specifically, the study aimed to address the following research questions quantitatively;

- (1) Are there any significant differences between the youth and elderly on their shockvertising appreciation?
- (2) Are there any significant differences between male and female consumers on their shockvertising appreciation?
- (3) Are there any significant differences between single and married consumers on their shockvertising appreciation?
- (4) Are there any significant differences between followers of African traditional religion and Christians on shockvertising appreciation?
- (5) Are there any significant differences between highly educated and less educated on their shockvertising appreciation?

The rest of the study will therefore extensively explore the literature related to controversial marketing, outline the methodology adopted in this study, analyze and present the results, and make the relevant discussion of the results.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Response model for controversial advertisements

The overarching theory of research was the proposed response model for controversial advertising developed by Waller (2006). The model was based on the buyer response process (Rossiter & Percy, 1997). The starting point would be a potential buyer being exposed to a controversial ad through some advertisement media. In this study, a restaurant patron is exposed to a fried chicken ad. There is a picture of the fried chicken and the controversial message, “open those legs and eat”. The next step would be the processing of the ad stimuli by the prospective buyer (Waller, 2006). This processing may elicit positive or negative effects. The response of the potential buyer to the ad was the main thrust of this study. Consumers were then asked to indicate their evaluation of the ad as, say pleasant to unpleasant, good to bad, enjoyable to not enjoyable, etc. This was exactly in accordance with Waller’s (2006) response model, which indicated that prospective buyers may respond positively or negatively to the ad and this reaction would culminate in the decision to buy or not buy the product. The reaction also forms the basis of brand resonance and viral marketing.

### 2.2. Controversial advertisements

The contemporary marketplace is littered with message clutter (Kadic-Magljajlic et al., 2017). Breaking the clutter has become one of the key objectives in designing most marketing campaigns (Chan et al., 2007). One such method is through controversy-themed advertisements which are also known as shockvertising (Singh & Chahal, 2019). Controversial advertisement can be described as a form of marketing campaign that seeks to grab attention of the audience through the use of unconventional strategies despite the fact that it may invoke

reactions of disgust, embarrassment, or distaste from some population segments (Belch & Belch, 2009). Although most of the controversial ads are not illegal, they tend to violate social norms, morals, and customs (Dahl et al., 2003). The scope of controversial ads ranges from depictions of eroticism, presentation of celebrities in a controversial manner, stereotyping of certain social groups, and deliberate inaccurate presentation of certain information (Bachnick & Nowacki, 2018). Shockvertising is credited to Benetton's advertising campaigns during the late 1980s where the company used unrelated images to the brand being advertised (Arnaud et al., 2018).

Thus, it should be appreciated that the way shocking ads are evaluated greatly varies with some finding them to be socially acceptable (Chan et al., 2007; Dens et al., 2008). Controversial ads elicit attention (Arnaud et al., 2018), create higher levels of brand awareness and recall (Sabri & Obermiller, 2012), have long-lasting impression (Machova et al., 2015), arouse curiosity (Perez-Sobrinio, 2016), are highly entertaining (Dens et al., 2008; deRun & Ting, 2014), and generally are regarded as exceptionally creative (Bachnick & Nowacki, 2018). Moreover, an earlier study by Vezina and Paul (1997) found that consumers favorably evaluate provocative ads. However, other earlier studies have concluded that controversial ads have some negative consequences (Dens et al., 2008) such as undermining brand values, creating brand confusion, boycotting of offensively advertised brands (Jardine, 2006; Millan & Elliott, 2004), and being socially unacceptable (Phau & Prendergast, 2001). It is the later finding of social acceptability that raised the interest of this study. Previous research has been focused on trying to condemn shockvertising without stating the demographic groups that are mostly offended (Singh & Chahal, 2019). Such a blanket dismissal has not been helpful. According to Prendergast et al. (2002), consumers' levels of perceived ad controversy depend on demographic factors since controversy is not a static phenomenon (Arnaud et al., 2018), hence, cannot be generalized to everyone.

The idea behind the use of sexual humor is that people frequently think of sex more often than other social issues in life. Previous research by Fisher et al. (2012) has shown that on average men think of sex 34.2 times a day, while women think of it 18.6 times per day. It is as a result of the pervasiveness of sex thoughts constantly lingering in the minds of most consumers that marketers came up with a cliché that "sex sells". Due to the high frequency of sex thoughts, advertisers have found that adverts with sex appeal easily attract the attention of consumers (Reichert et al., 2001). This is mainly caused by the levels of erotophilia. Erotophilia is defined as the disposition to respond favourably to sexual cues (Arcos-Romero et al., 2020). A significant body of knowledge pointed to varying levels of erotophilia on the bases of age gender (Del Río-Olvera et al., 2013; Guerra et al., 2017), and marital status (Guerra et al., 2017).

### 2.3. Age

Age can be categorized into the youth and the elderly. Controversial ads are not expected to have the same impact across various age groups of consumers (Barnes & Dotson, 1990; Nimrod & Berdychevsky, 2018). The level of tolerance towards controversial ads decreases progressively as we move upward from one age group to another. Controversial ads seem to violate moral standards in a society (Chan et al., 2007). Their acceptance therefore depends on how a group of people cares about existing morals (Sacco et al., 2021) since in some cases sexual jokes are regarded as immoral (Laftman et al., 2021). It seems that younger people are less inclined to the upholding of moral standards (Sacco et al., 2021). In that way, they find offensive issues more entertaining, refreshing, and exciting (Parrott & Hopp, 2019). This may not be the case with elderly people who have strict observance of moral standards (Nimrod & Berdychevsky, 2018). Any violation of moral standards is viewed with disgust and disdain. These arguments find some empirical support from a study by Waller (2007) where controversial ads were found to be more offensive by the elderly people than the youth. Moreover, the youth are more erotophilic than the elderly and therefore are more likely to appreciate sexual appeal in ads than the elderly. Therefore, based on the varying levels of morality conformance, it is anticipated that:



**H1:** *Shockvertising is appreciated more by the youth (18 to 39 years old) than it is by elderly people (40 years and older).*

#### **2.4. Gender**

Gender differences have been noticed across a wide range of issues in the extant literature (Lucka et al., 2021; Malik & Sayin, 2021; Valek & Picherit Duthler, 2020). One area where such differences have been visible was in appreciating the sense of humor (Evans et al., 2019; Moake & Robert, 2022; Tosun et al., 2018). Generally, men are regarded as having higher levels of sense of humor especially when it relates to sexual content (Ford, 2000; Lockyer & Savigny, 2018; Sacco et al., 2021). This contrasts with females who generally have lower tolerance levels towards ads that degenerate their sexuality (Gurreri et al., 2016). An empirical study conducted in the western world by Barnes and Dotson (1990) revealed that controversial ads have less impact on females than on males. Women are more likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth when exposed to shockvertising (Christy, 2006). A study by Fahy et al., (1995) indicated that women highly disapprove sexist controversial advertisements. Another study by Prendergast et al. (2002) found women to be highly disgusted by ads with connotations of nudity. Moreover, men are more erotophilic than women (Guerra et al., 2017) and therefore are more likely to appreciate sexual appeal in ads than women. Basing on the foregoing, it is posited that:

**H2:** *Shockvertising is appreciated more by males than females.*

#### **2.5. Marital status**

Marriage is one of the institutions that are pervasive in all aspects of social life (Eckols, 1999). In conventional terms, marriage is a ritual that involves uniting two people to become husband and wife (Girgis et al., 2011). Marriage generally changes one's behavior and attitudes towards general issues in life (Gubernskaya, 2010). Marriage is associated with attaining some levels of decency and consciousness to socially sensitive issues (Joo, 2015). Single people have fewer issues they regard as more sexually sensitive than married people (Huston et al., 2021). On the other hand, married people especial mothers are faced with a lot of social expectations (Mudhovozi et al., 2012) such as appearing decent through refraining from publicly discussing intimate issues (Elliott et al., 2015). A study by Barnes and Dotson revealed that married people found controversial ads to have less impact than single customers. Therefore, it is anticipated that;

**H3:** *Shockvertising is appreciated more by singles (unmarried, widows, widowers, and divorcees) than married people.*

#### **2.6. Religion**

In Zimbabwe, there are generally two dominant religions which are, namely, Christianity and African religion (Chitando, 2018). These two religions have diametrically opposite doctrines which are always pitted against each other in the public sphere (Mpofu, 2021). Religious doctrines play an important role in determining morality (McKay & Whitehouse, 2014) and whether an advert is controversial, and how the audience will find it effective. Christianity abhors any sexually suggestive behavior to the extent that it regards even entertaining sexual thoughts outside marriage as a sin (Baiocco et al., 2017). Therefore, a depiction of sexually suggestive themes in advertising is repulsive to Christian audiences. The African religion is quite flexible in its approach to sexual issues (Erlank, 2008) as long as there are no in-laws in the vicinity (Wight et al., 2006). Thus, sexually suggestive issues are a no-go-area in the presence of in-laws only, while outside those social settings nothing about sex is censored. Empirical support to the differential effects of shockvertising came from a study by Barnes and Dotson (1990) where the church attendees were found to abhor offensive, controversial advertising rather than those who do not attend any church gathering. In the context of Zimbabwe, church attendees are usually Christians, while the

African religion does not have formal church services other than annual family gatherings to appease ancestral spirits or perform rituals. Therefore, it is anticipated that;

**H4:** *Shockvertising is appreciated more by followers of African traditional religion than by Christians.*

### **2.7. Education**

The levels of education in a society can be categorized as the highly educated and the less educated (Shohaimi et al., 2003). This kind of education traditionally refers to formal education which results in some form of certification (Kirksey & Lloydhauser, 2022). The increase in the level of one's education increases one's tolerance to diversity and acceptance of issues that are traditionally regarded as a taboo (Singh & Chahal, 2019). In a study by Barnes and Dotson (1990), it was revealed that the less educated were more likely to find controversial ads less appealing than college graduates. These findings are contrasted with later findings by Singh and Chahal (2019) who found that highly educated people were more disgusted by controversial advertising than the less educated. Their arguments may be inferred to mean that the highly educated are fully conscious of the manipulative nature of controversial ads, hence their disdain for them. However, based on the arguments advanced earlier on, it is anticipated that;

**H5:** *Shockvertising is highly appreciated by the highly educated (12 years or more of education) than by the less educated (less than 12 years of education).*

## **3. Methodology**

The research was anchored on a positivist philosophy, of which the objective was to establish relationships between categorical and continuous variables. A survey of restaurant patrons was done in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe. Respondents were asked to evaluate a controversial ad which had been designed by the authors. Details of the methodology employed are presented in this section.

### **3.1. Population and sampling**

The study population comprised fast-food restaurant patrons. Although fast-food is not classified as a controversial product, the controversy part comes in on the advertisement which was designed by the researchers for the study, see [appendix](#) for the advert. The advert portrayed both visual and verbal controversial content laced with erotic indecent and sexist imagery in a subliminal style. Subliminal execution style subconsciously impacts the viewers through the embedding of genitalia shapes and trending sexual jokes (Reichert, 2003).

In a mega city like Harare, a sampling frame for fast-food consumers can hardly be established. Most fast-food restaurants rely on the volume of transactions and therefore cannot keep a database of their customers. While in developed countries such databases can exist, in frontier markets like Zimbabwe the level of technology is still backward. As a result, the researchers had to resort to non-probability convenience sampling method. Convenience sampling method is appropriate where a sampling frame cannot be established (Struwig & Stead, 2013). The use of convenience sampling in studies related to fast-food restaurants is not without precedence (e.g. Burger & Grandey, 2006; Mukucha et al., 2020).

### **3.2. Data collection instrument**

The data collection instrument recorded demographic variables of age, gender, marital status, religion, and level of education. These demographics were recorded in a binary format. The ad was designed by the researchers based on some controversial ads which were trending in the market. To ensure face validity of the ad, expert opinions from five advertising practitioners were sought as well as pilot testing in Chitungwiza (a city which is adjacent to Harare city in



Zimbabwe). Ad evaluation was assessed on a seven 7-point semantically differential item: “The ad is pleasant—unpleasant,” (coded as AD1) “The ad is good—bad” (coded as AD2), “The ad is enjoyable,” (coded as AD3), “I like—dislike the ad,” (coded as AD4) “I react favourably—unfavourably to the ad,” (coded as AD5), “I feel negative—positive toward the ad,” (coded as AD6), and “The ad is fun—not fun to read” (coded as AD7). The measurement scale was adopted by Biehal et al. (1992).

### **3.3. Data collection procedures**

A survey was conducted on fast-food patrons of one of the most popular fast-food restaurants in the city of Harare, which is famous for its use of controversial ads that are laced with sexual humour. The survey targeted lone customers as they were leaving the restaurant in order to avoid confounding effects (Burger & Grandey, 2006). The data collection process took 4 weeks as the researchers were avoiding busy periods. Busy periods like the lunch hour and dinner are associated with less cooperation from the respondents. The patrons were shown a controversial ad designed by the researchers (see [appendix](#)-data collection instrument) and then asked to evaluate it using the ad evaluation scale.

### **3.4. Data analysis procedures**

Data analysis was conducted using Factorial Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) through Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) software. Factorial ANOVA assesses whether there are significant differences in the mean scores of the dependent variables across two or more groups (Field, 2018). The psychometric properties of the latent dependent variable were validated through Analysis of Moment structures (AMOS) using confirmatory analysis (CFA) for convergent validity, construct reliability, and measurement invariance, respectively (Brown, 2015).

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Sample characteristics**

The sample characteristics shown on Table 1 are the age, gender, and marital status, religion, and education level of respondents.

The studied sample comprised mostly the youth (55.5%) and the elderly (44.5%). Males were 47.9%, while females were the majority (52.1%). Most of the respondents were single (74.3%), with the reminder (25.7%) being married. Christian believers dominated the sample (56.6%), with African religious believers being 43.5%. The highly educated (55.5%) were more than the less educated (44.5%).

### **4.2. Convergent validity and reliability**

The psychometric properties of the ad evaluation scale assessed are shown in Table 2; that is convergent validity and reliability.

The ad evaluation scale exhibited acceptable fit indices, NFI = .913, IFI = .915, and CFI = .915. These psychometric properties were all within an acceptable range for convergent validity, AVE = .688, construct reliability, CR = .936, and item reliability, IR > .4 for all the items.

### **4.3. Measurement invariance**

Measurement invariance is another property of the measurement scale (Meredith, 1993). Measurement invariance tests whether survey items mean the same thing across different groups (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002) for studies that make comparisons for different independent groups. This study assessed configural invariance using confirmatory factor analysis. Configural invariance was tested by not imposing the constraints on the factor structure for each group separately (Koufteros & Marcoulides, 2006).

**Table 1. Demographics**

Variable		N	%
Age	Youth	666	55.5
	Elderly	534	44.5
Gender	Males	575	47.9
	Females	625	52.1
Marital status	Single	892	74.3
	Married	308	25.7
Religion	Christianity	680	56.6
	African	520	43.4
Education	Less educated	534	44.5
	Highly educated	666	55.5

**Table 2. Psychometric properties and fit indices**

Construct	Item	$\lambda$	$\epsilon$	Sig	Indicator reliability	AVE	CR
Ad evaluation	AD1	.841	.293	***	.707	.678	.936
	AD2	.868	.247	***	.753		
	AD3	.872	.240	***	.760		
	AD4	.896	.200	***	.803		
	AD5	.762	.419	***	.581		
	AD6	.756	.428	***	.572		
	AD7	.757	.427	***	.573		

The presence of configural invariance was shown through all the groups for each variable having adequate fit as shown in Table 3. This proves that the loading patterns are the same across the groups and the respondents use a similar conceptual framework in responding to the survey items.

#### 4.4. Hypotheses testing

Having attained acceptable measurement scale properties, the study proceeded to hypotheses testing. The five study hypotheses suggested that there are statistically significant differences in evaluation based on age, gender, marital status, religion, and education. These hypotheses were tested using five-way ANOVA. Factorial ANOVA was chosen on the basis that the study had more than one categorical independent variable (age, gender, marital status, religion, and level of education), and a single metric dependent variable (ad evaluation). Prior to running the test, the primary assumptions of ANOVA were considered. One of the statistical assumptions of ANOVA is that the dependent variable must be normally distributed across all the categories of the dependent variable. Normality was assessed using skewness and kurtosis statistics, and the results are shown in Table 4.

The results shown in Table 4 indicate that the data for ad evaluation in all the categories of the independent variables are within the acceptable range of being between  $-1$  and  $1$ . Therefore, a parametric test of ANOVA was deemed appropriate for hypotheses testing.

The study assessed the second assumption of ANOVA which is homoscedasticity using the Levene's test of equality of variances based on the mean. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 3. Configural measurement invariance								
Variable		NFI	IFI	CFI	Variable	NFI	IFI	CFI
Age	Youth	.902	.905	.905	Elderly	.922	.926	.925
Gender	Male	.931	.935	.935	Female	.902	.905	.905
Marital status	Single	.906	.909	.908	Married	.913	.919	.919
Religion	Christianity	.847	.877	.877	African	.933	.937	.937
Education	Less educated	.917	.921	.920	Highly educated	.906	.909	.909

The results indicated that there was equality of variance for ad evaluation across several groups, such as age,  $F(1,1198) = 2.060$ ,  $p = .152$ , gender,  $F(1,1198) = .216$ ,  $p = .642$ , marital status,  $F(1,1198) = .020$ ,  $p = .889$ , and education,  $F(1,1198) = .453$ ,  $p = .501$ , except for religion,  $F(1,1198) = 11.869$ ,  $p = .001$ .

The mean and standard deviation of the demographic groups are shown in Table 6.

A one-sample t-test was performed (Tables 7 and 8) to compare the mean of ad evaluation against the test value of 3.5. The mean value of ( $M = 5.21$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) was not significantly different from that of the test value,  $t(1199) = 45.540$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Tests of between-subjects effects are on Table 9. The five study hypotheses suggested that there are statistically significant differences in evaluation based on age, gender, marital status, religion, and education. These hypotheses were tested using five-way ANOVA.

The results from a factorial ANOVA test revealed that there are statistically significant differences between the youth ( $M = 5.29$ ,  $SD = 1.270$ ) and the elderly ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 1.317$ ),  $F(3, 296) = 4.753$ ,  $p = .029$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .004$ , observed power = .586; the single ( $M = 5.26$ ,  $SD = 1.288$ ) and the married ( $M = 5.04$ ,  $SD = 1.316$ ),  $F(3, 296) = 6.454$ ,  $p = .011$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .005$ , observed power = .719. However, there were no statistically significant differences between the males ( $M = 5.27$ ,  $SD = 1.303$ ) and the females ( $M = 5.15$ ,  $SD = 1.293$ ),  $F(3, 296) = 1.291$ ,  $p = .256$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .001$ , observed power = .206; the Christians ( $M = 5.30$ ,  $SD = 1.203$ ) and the African religion members ( $M = 5.08$ ,  $SD =$

**Table 4. Normality tests**

Independent variable	Category	Skewness	Kurtosis -.554
Age	Youth	-.607	
	Elderly	-.734	.046
Gender	Male	-.741	-.334
	Female	-.597	-.259
Marital status	Single	-.793	-.027
	Married	-.314	-.865
Religion	Christianity	-.552	-.465
	African	-.687	-.437
Education	Less educated	-.754	-.075
	Highly educated	-.594	-.469

**Table 5. Tests of homogeneity of variances for ad evaluation**

Independent variables	Levene statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Age	2.060	1	1198	.152
Gender	.216	1	1198	.642
Marital status	.020	1	1198	.889
Religion	11.869	1	1198	.001
Education	.453	1	1198	.501

**Table 6. Descriptives**

Variable		Mean	Standard deviation
Age	Youth	5.29	1.270
	Elderly	5.14	1.317
Gender	Male	5.27	1.303
	Female	5.15	1.292
Marital status	Single	5.26	1.288
	Married	5.04	1.316
Religion	Christianity	5.30	1.203
	African	5.08	1.405
Education	Less educated	5.27	1.284
	Highly educated	5.16	1.308

**Table 7. One-sample statistics**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
AD evaluation	1200	5.21	1.298	.037

1.405),  $F(3, 296) = 1.679$ ,  $p = .195$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .001$ , observed power = .254; the less educated ( $M = 5.27$ ,  $SD = 1.284$ ) and the highly educated ( $M = 5.16$ ,  $SD = 1.308$ ),  $F(3, 296) = .030$ ,  $p = .862$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .000$ , observed power = .053.

## 5. Discussion

The main motivation for controversial advertising is to cut through the media clutter (Arnaud et al., 2018). Offensive ads are common in products that are used in a personal context such as condoms, tampons, and undergarments (Gurrieri et al., 2016). However, offensive advertising has recently been extended to ordinary products such as fast-food. In this study, restaurant customers were asked to evaluate a controversial ad in Zimbabwe. In general, all the surveyed respondents favorably evaluated controversial ads. These results reflect that sexual innuendos are no longer a taboo (John & D'Abreo, 2017). The results indicated that all the studied demographic groups equally favorably appraised the controversial ad presented before them. However, there were some demographic variations in terms of how the controversial ad was evaluated with regard to age and marital status.

The findings from this study indicated that the youth find controversial ads with sexual humor to be more effective than the elderly people. This can be explained by the fact that the youth are likely to be exposed to controversial advertising at a younger age due to the pervasiveness of social media, and they tend to get used to it. Less appreciation of controversial ads exists despite

**Table 8. One-sample test**

	Test Value = 3.5				
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
					Lower Upper
AD evaluation	45.540	1199	.000	1.707	1.63 1.78

**Notes:** A one-sample t-test was performed to compare the mean of ad evaluation against the test value of 3.5. The mean value of ( $M = 5.21$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) was not significantly different from that of the test value,  $t(1199) = 45.540$ ,  $p < .001$ .

**Table 9. Tests of between-subjects effects**

Source	df	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power
Intercept	1	13269.426	.000	.919	13269.426	1.000
Age	1	4.753	.029	.004	4.753	.586
Gender	1	1.291	.256	.001	1.291	.206
Marital status	1	6.454	.011	.005	6.454	.719
Religion	1	1.679	.195	.001	1.679	.254
Education	1	.030	.862	.000	.030	.053

Dependent Variable: Ad evaluation

the fact that most elderly people are sexually active beyond their reproductive years in the case of women (Tetley et al., 2016). This result contradicts earlier findings by Barnes and Dotson (1990) where young people were in less favour of controversial ads than the elderly people. This could be perhaps due to evolving or differences in social norms and cultures. The results also contrasted findings from a study by John and D'Abreo (2017) where controversial ads appeal was similar across different age groups. In Africa, the elderly are supposed to be the custodians of norms and values of a society (Singh & Chahal, 2019). They are therefore supposed to preserve those values through disdaining any controversial form of communication.

The results indicated that there are statistically significant differences in terms of appreciating controversial ads laced with sexual humor on the basis of marital status. Single people were found to enjoy controversial ads more than married people. This is surprising considering that married people are theoretically involved in sexual encounters than single people and hence any humor emanating from that subject is expected to be well appreciated. However, most married people especially in Africa are parents. As parents, they have a moral duty to respect the sanctity of sexual intercourse (Mudhovozi et al., 2012) through avoiding any public discussions of the subject in whatever manner and context.

The results revealed that there are no gender differences in terms of appreciating sexually controversial advertising. It seems both males and females highly appreciate advertising that depicts sexist humor. The research assistants who presented the controversial ad were women and previous research has indicated that females enjoy sexist humor when it comes from other women (Parrott & Hopp, 2019). Moreover, this might be due to the fading away of the gender stereotypes that for long periods of time had sought to portray women as being less interested in sexual activities (Armstrong et al., 2014; Berdychevsky & Nimrod, 2016). The findings of this study deviate from a study by John and D'Abreo (2017) where there were gender differences in the evaluation of controversial ads.

The study did not find any significant religious differences in terms of controversial ad appeal. Both Christianity and African religious members found controversial ads appealing. Perhaps, this is due to the diminishing religious conventions that used to find sexist humor distasteful. More specifically, sexually explicit sentiments are common in Christianity through the Songs of Solomon, and in African religion most totems equally carry sexual tones.

Finally, the results from this study indicated that there are no significant differences between the less educated and the highly educated respondents. This is aptly explained by the fact that almost everyone is now educated even though some may not have some form of certification. The people in this sample who were deemed less educated can only be regarded as such because they did not have some form of formal certification. However, with the advent of the internet almost everyone is now educated. This perhaps account for the blurred attitudes towards controversial



ads between what this study earlier on categorized as the highly educated and the less educated. These findings are a diversion from a study by Singh and Chahal (2019) where the highly educated were found to be more highly offended by controversial ads than the less educated.

## 6. Conclusions and managerial implications

The study revealed that in general controversial ads are well appreciated by the target market since the mean value was above half. There were some differential effects of age and marital status on the ad evaluation. However, there was no differential effect of gender, religion, and levels of education on ad evaluation. The study recommended the use of controversial ads as a way of cutting through information clutter. The study therefore concluded that most of the fast-food consumers are erotophilic in the sense that they associate positive feelings with sex.

## 7. Limitations and future research agenda

This study surveyed the respondents who had just patronized the restaurant. This might have brought in some confounding effects. The respondents are more likely to have been influenced by the quality of the service they have received than the nature of an advert presented before them. Therefore, future studies must randomly pick respondents away from a restaurant (deemed to be the advertiser by respondents). The study was based on a single large restaurant in Harare. Furthermore, this study did not seek to find why controversial ads had an overwhelming appreciation across the entire demographic divide. Therefore, future studies must seek to definitively determine why controversial ads laced with sexist humor are popular with the target audience of the samples surveyed.

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All authors did not have any conflict of interest.

### Data availability statement

The dataset for the study can be requested from the corresponding author on reasonable grounds.

### Correction

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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## Appendix

### Data collection instrument extract

#### Section A:

#### Demographics

Indicate your demographics on the following variables below;

Age	18–29
	30–39
	40–49
	50–59
	60+
Gender	Male
	Female
Marital status	Single
	Married
Religion	African
	Christianity
	Other
Level of Education	Primary
	Secondary
	Tertiary



## Section B:

### Ad evaluation

Please tick the statement which best describes what you think about the advertisement above, the highest is 7 and the lowest is 1:

The ad is . . . .	pleasant	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	unpleasant
The ad is . . . . .	good	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	bad
The ad is . . . .	enjoyable	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	Not enjoyable
I	like	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	Dislike the ad
I react	favorably	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	Unfavorably to the ad
I feel	positive	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	Negative towards the ad
The ad is . . . .	fun	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	Not fun read