

**Does Controversial Advertising Still Work?  
Four New Zealand Case Studies**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis addresses the question, do controversial methods of advertising still work? The research considers four New Zealand case studies: 2 Cheap Cars, 30 Seconds, Hell Pizza and the New Zealand Transport Agency (NZTA). Interviews were conducted with marketing managers for each brand, and secondary sources of information were consulted. The findings show that controversial advertising methods can work very well for a brand as long as guidelines and strategies are in place. All four brands have been successful in using controversial methods of advertising. Some will continue using this approach and some may prefer to stay away from it for a time, despite previous success. This research can help other marketing managers to see how controversial methods of advertising can work for their brands.

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## Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person except that which appears in the citations and acknowledgements. Nor does it contain material, which to a substantial extent I have submitted for the qualification for any other degree of another university or other institution of higher learning.

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## **Ethical Approval**

AUT University Ethics Committee (AUTEK) approved the ethics application for this research on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2018. Application number 18/84 (see Appendix A).

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

This chapter provides an introduction chapter to the research being undertaken on controversial methods of advertising, when they work and when they do not work. The chapter begins by providing the background to the research. It then presents the research aim and research questions. Lastly, the chapter introduces the methodology used for the research and describes the structure of the thesis.

### **1.1 Background to the research**

According to Dahl (2003), the world is changing fast; including the way businesses advertise their brands. Whether the brand is advertised on TV, on radio or in the newspaper, methods of advertising are changing. There is so much clutter of ads, consumers exposed to several screens a day and it becomes harder and harder for an advertiser to catch consumer's attention. For this reason, businesses have started to use controversial methods of advertising, where they shock people in order to grab their attention. Shock advertising uses different techniques, some of them include advertising that includes sexual references or even makes people feel bad about themselves. The question is how far is too far the businesses push it with their 'shockvertising'?

So, the question arises, does controversial advertising work? In what cases does controversial advertising work? There are many different case studies focused on this question; all have different findings regarding the subject. "Globally, businesses want to maximize their profits and get their name out there by using different methods of advertising. Some businesses have particularly focused on controversial advertising methods, such as the Benetton Group" (Essays, 2013). All of Benetton's advertisements are very revealing and they are proud of it, it is their statement of the brand.

According to Chan (2007), controversial advertising is a very 'brave' method of advertising as it goes against traditional ways and aims to stand out in the crowd of other advertisements as well as to create noise. This form of advertising can be quite bold, disturbing, provocative, cause a lot of complaints from the public and most importantly, damage a brand's reputation. Controversial methods of advertising are also known for triggering people's emotions and causing offence.

Controversial advertising should be applied carefully, with proper guidelines, as there is a big failure risk in terms of the loss of a business's reputation. In spite of all the risks, recent trends suggest there are plenty of successful examples of controversial advertising, for example, the Benneton group discussed above, where the company has managed to cut through the advertising clutter, gain free PR and maximise their profits.

## **1.2 Research aim and research questions**

This study examines the factors that affect the success of controversial methods of advertising. Controversial advertising can be quite risky and costly to the reputation of the brand if not implemented carefully. This research will examine four case studies, which will help managers identify what factors need to be taken into consideration when using controversial methods of advertising. The study will also help managers to have a better understanding of what they should be looking for when appraising the implementation of the strategies adopted for controversial advertising methods and to make sure all guidelines are followed correctly.

The main goal of this research is to understand controversial methods of advertising and the consequences of using these methods by examining past cases and their outcomes. The research will provide a guide to business managers, enabling them to gain important insights into the context of different advertising strategies they may consider as well as the efficacy of using controversial advertising. In order to achieve this, a literature review is conducted which will outline four main advertising theories that are of importance to understanding the effects of controversial advertising.

For this paper, the following research questions are addressed:

- 1) Does controversial advertising work?
- 2) If it does work, in what instances does it work?
- 3) And if it does not work, why not?

### 1.3 Justification

The following are the four main advertising theories referred to in this research, and which are explored in the literature review chapter:

- Attribution Theory
- Minimal-Effects Theory
- Cutting-Edge Theory
- Perception of the Recipient Theory

According to Erdogan, although the controversial advertising method has been used by businesses for many years, there is still a lack of literature available on this subject. Controversial advertising seeks to address a number of problems. First, there are so many other advertisements and it is so hard for businesses to cut through the clutter of all the other advertisements. Second, it is very hard to make people remember the advert as well as the product being advertised. Having these two big problems, businesses have to come up with something very creative and memorable. This is when controversial advertising comes into play.

“Controversial advertising refers to shocking, surprising and playing on people’s emotions” (Erdogan, 2008). In the literature review chapter, a number of research cases are presented in order to demonstrate different views on the subject of controversial advertising. This thesis focuses on exploring four different New Zealand brands and how they implemented controversial methods of advertising, what success or outcomes they had, and how they managed complaints.

Only a few of the studies discussed in the literature review chapter focus on different outcomes from using such methods of advertising. Some focus on the use of advertising appeals such as sex (Benet et al. 1993; Waller 2003), some on fear advertising (LaTour, Nataraajan, & Henthorne (1994), and some on the need to cut through the clutter of other advertisements (Kadic-Maglajlic et al. 2015).

Most of the studies focus on big global brands and measure the effects that controversial advertising has on their consumers. According to Theodorakis, Koritos, and Stathakopoulos (2015) and Kadić-Maglajić et al. (2017), the more controversial an advertisement is in

relation to the moral agenda, the higher the sales of the brand become. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the extent to which controversial methods of advertising are effective in New Zealand and to determine how successful or unsuccessful these methods are. Parry (2013) suggests that controversial advertising creates an emotional response to a product, good or service. Therefore, this research aims at investigating consumers' emotional response to controversial advertising in New Zealand, how marketing managers have managed any complaints from the public, as well as the overall experience marketing managers have had when using controversy in their advertising. This thesis helps to fill the research gap by asking, does controversial advertising still work? The findings of this thesis will provide beneficial insights to business managers of different brands who have considered using controversial methods of advertising. This thesis uncovers some of the strategic principles applicable to businesses that may be considering the use of controversy in their advertising, as well as the outcomes of this kind of advertising and the effects it can have on the brand. The thesis also provides guidelines to marketing managers in the use of controversial advertising and outlines the strategies that should be applied. Further, the paper presents findings relating to the effect controversial advertising has on consumers, thus helping businesses to choose the right method to advertise their brand that reduces the risk of failure such as damaging a brand's reputation and offending the public because of the controversial nature of the advertising.

#### **1.4 Methodology**

This research applies a case study approach in order to examine the research questions on controversial advertising methods and their effectiveness for businesses. Four cases studies are presented in this study. These are four well-known New Zealand brands that use controversial methods of advertising and have been subject to complaints by the public on a number of occasions: Hell Pizza, 2 Cheap Cars, 30 Seconds and the New Zealand Transport Agency (NZTA).

Two different sources of data collection were used for this study: primary data, which were collected through personal interviews with the marketing managers of the four selected companies, and secondary data, which were found in multiple past research papers on the subject. These are fully presented in the methodology chapter. The collected data set was examined by using the qualitative approach of thematic analysis processed through NVivo

software. In Nvivo, the data was sorted into different themes. This will be further explained in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

## **1.5 Outline of the thesis**

This paper focuses on controversial advertising implemented in New Zealand. The paper consists of five chapters. The first chapter provides background information on the research question and justification for the research methods applied. The aim of this chapter is to provide a brief insight into what this research covers and why this research is important, as well as to identify the gap in the previous research and how it can be addressed using this research.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of past academic literature on controversial advertising, which will help answer the research question of this paper.

Chapter 3 presents a detailed discussion of the methodology used in this research, while Chapter 4 presents the research findings.

The last chapter discusses the findings of the research followed by a discussion on the implications of the study, including why it was important to conduct this research, how it contributes to the marketing industry, how it can help marketing managers, and what future research should focus on. The discussion will also highlight the limitations of the current research.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **2. 1 Introduction**

It is important to understand why and how companies use controversial advertising. This chapter reviews current research into this style of advertising. By looking at past case studies to determine instances of success and failure, the chapter identifies the outcomes of controversial advertising practices in order to help answer the research questions: Does controversial advertising work? If it does work, in what instances does it work? And if it does not work, why not? The chapter looks at the key theories of attribution, advertising effectiveness, minimal-effects, and cutting-edge in order to understand how these contribute to controversial advertising. In addition, this chapter examines past case studies and the area of societal norms. The literature review relates to the research problem by focusing on advertising theories, issues with controversial advertising, key themes in controversial advertising, controversial campaign studies, past research, and the gaps in the literature.

### **2. 2 Research problem**

Advertising is pivotal to the success of a brand. However, when consumers perceive advertising to be controversial, this can have a negative effect on the brand. Companies use various opportunities to promote products, brands, or services. The overall success of a brand, service, or product is dependent on advertising as it influences the consumer's decision-making process (Erdogan, 2008; Hamid & Madni, 2016; LaTour & Henthorne, 1994). Advertising is the utilisation of paid mass media to pursue and influence a target audience (Wimmer, 2013). The objective of advertising is to offer information in a process through which the audience will take some form of action immediately or in the intended future (Gupta, 2010). The critical aim of promotion is to sell an idea, product, or service. Advertisements have over the years become the main form of communication between the company and the consumer (Hamid & Madni, 2016; Kubacka, 2012). Traditionally, advertising aims to create a positive image of a brand and through association, offers pleasurable consumer experiences associated with the product (Sandikci, 2001).

To cut through the ever-expanding clutter of marketing messages seeking consumer attention, some advertisers adopt controversial approaches to advertising content. Controversial advertising, otherwise known as shock advertising, may insult audiences by violating their



norms or use confrontational or offensive language (Dahl, Frankenberger, & Manchanda, 2003). Controversial advertising may include the advertising of products perceived as shocking in their own way and the use of advertising appeals such as fear and sex (Benet et al., 1993; Waller 2003).

Controversial advertising not only stems from the advertisements themselves but also from the products advertised. Marketing managers may perceive that advertising that deliberately utilises controversy is a sign of desperation and for this reason controversial advertising is rare. In general, reputable media sources are reluctant to put such advertisements on air because of the risk to their reputation. However, some companies intentionally use controversial advertising with the aim of offending, scandalising, surprising, or shocking certain audiences so as to achieve a high processing rate of certain brand information (Huhmann, 2008). Some companies utilise "guerrilla" marketing tactics instead. These marketing tactics include catching people by surprise, sabotage, ambushes, and raids. Despite utilising a small budget, guerrilla marketing attracts customers. It avoids provoking controversy and instead aims at targeting consumers at a more personal and memorable level. The following literature review provides background theory as to why controversial advertising methods are used by businesses.

## **2. 3 Theories of advertising**

### **2.3.1 Attribution theory**

Attribution theory is relevant to the topic of controversial advertising because it can help in understanding how people might react to a controversial advertisement and how their attitudes will affect their behaviour. Attribution theory relates to how people understand experiences and how this relates to their behaviour and thinking processes. It is about understanding why people do what they do. Attribution theory was developed by social psychologists, with Heider (1958) being the first person to recommend a psychological theory of attribution. However, Weiner and his research partners (Jones et al., 1972; Weiner, 1974, 1986) designed a theoretical framework that then became a key research paradigm of social psychology.

Heider (1958) believed that a person can make two different types of attribution:

- Internal attribution, where a person does what he/she does because of the way he/she is, such as attitude, individuality, or character.

- External attribution, where a person acts according to a situation/circumstance he/she is in.

Businesses are required to do a lot more than they used to; for example, they must encourage consumers that they need this particular product/service in order to solve their problem or better their life situation. Advertising effectiveness can be defined as the extent to which advertising generates a certain desired effect (Kuehn, 1962). Attribution theory assumes that people relate to their past when confronting a new situation in life. In other words, consumers rate a product/service by drawing on past experience. No matter if they like the product/service or not, they make assumptions about the product itself, the producer, and even the country of origin based on these past experiences, which in turn affects purchasing decisions.

According to Heider (1958), consumers allocate worth to an item they are thinking of purchasing. Some consumers may reflect on the brand's name or the lack of it, while others may focus more on the product/service itself. Price is another influencing factor in attributing value – some customers may attribute bad quality to an item with a very low price point. Another influencing factor is peer group. People tend to fit in with their peers.

### **2.3.2 Minimal-effects theory**

Another area of interest for controversial advertising is the theory of minimal-effects. Paul Lazarsfeld constructed this theory in 1940. According to this theory, there is an active audience that is in control of their media exposure. This theory maintains that advertising has almost no effect on consumer buying habits. Further, it holds that media is not as powerful as previously thought and it can only reinforce existing beliefs formed through community, class, religion, and discussion (Zajonc, 1980). This type of audience is in charge of what they are watching, listening to, and who they interact with. They pick and choose and refuse the rest depending on what they are looking for and what comes to mind when using the product/service. Mass media uses propaganda to motivate consumers' attitude, behaviours, and beliefs. However, the minimal-effects theory states that the effects of media manipulations have a limited influence on consumers; that is, they reinforce existing behaviours and attitudes rather than changing them. Consumers' ideas are formed by different factors, including culture, religion, and family traditions. For example, if a person likes neither Donald Trump nor Hillary Clinton, but he/she continues to watch a TV programme in

which both parties debate or give speeches, nothing is going to change this person's attitude towards the two. In other words, if this person has already formed an opinion about one or both of these two people, his/her opinion will only be reinforced by watching such TV programmes. This theory explains that the controversial advertising method will not affect a buyer's behaviour regardless.

### **2.3.3 Cutting-edge theory**

One area of research that is more recent than that of Paul Lazarsfeld (1940) and Heider (1958) is cutting-edge theory. The advertising industry is on the cutting edge of new cultural developments and trends within society and marketers aim to create something "catchy" for consumers (Wright, 1974). This theory also relates to the controversial advertising method in that businesses try to cut through the clutter by using shock advertising. The theory is also known as "critical race" theory and was founded by Professor Derrick Bell in 1976.

A person's attitudes and activities tend to influence his/her perception of support. Pearson (1990) identified a number of personal factors that can lead to a person's perception of a lack of support, including low self-esteem, fear, suspicion of others, fear of dependency, the insensitivities of others, and a stigmatised status. "Shocking" ads can make people feel guilt, fear, or doubt about themselves – thus, potentially prompting a perception of a lack of support - which then causes psychological pressure on their buying behaviour (Mittelstaedt, 1990).

### **2.3.4 Trends in the consumer consumption of advertising**

Six key aspects of consumers' consumption of advertising have been identified: the speed in which consumers process information, their anxieties, changes in demographics, globalisation, happiness, and the authenticity of the advertising message. It is important to understand these aspects when studying the controversial advertising method. Because of the speed of advertising, it is essential that businesses are aware of their consumers and their backgrounds. In general, individuals have both an appreciation and a fascination with knowledge and effectiveness – whether or not the effectiveness is targeted in the right direction. This can be due to a high use of computers, email, the Internet, mobile devices, as well as globalisation and low-cost travel. Consumers are literally consumed by social media these days, which also means they are exposed to a number of different screens on a daily

basis. It also important to note that people live in a fast-changing world where news is delivered in a completely different way than 10 years ago.

Controversial advertisements are a tool used to gain consumers' attention. Advertising agencies are nowadays forced to create innovative and new ways of advertising in order to manoeuvre through the clutter of today's advertising (Jensen & Collins, 2008). However, in the process of doing this, advertising agencies or marketing managers find themselves using more and more controversial advertising methods. Many researchers have studied the different aspects of controversial advertising but are yet to fully understand all the issues involved. Some of the issues include cutting through the clutter, creating a "catchy" campaign, and drawing customers into stores to purchase products. Controversial advertising has increasingly become dangerous for both advertising agencies and companies and it may not be the best form of advertising a product in today's society. The creation of such advertising is likely to jeopardise or offend customers, resulting in losses for a company or even damage to their reputation unless there are strategies and boundaries put in place.

### **2.3.5 Advertising appeal**

Advertising must be appealing to capture the intended audience and in the era of social media marketing and globalisation, advertisers are required to manage a split-second attention span in order to sell a product, service, or good (Kubacka, 2012). The need to gain, keep, and act on the attention of consumers has driven the concept of advertising into controversy, hence the rise of controversial advertising (Dahl et al., 2003; LaTour & Henthorne, 1994). The ideology of controversial advertising relies on the need to provoke and evoke an emotional response from the audience. The mandate of controversial advertising is to provoke, create a shock factor, and appeal to a specific audience (LaTour & Henthorne, 1994). In recent years, the appeal and utilisation of controversial advertising has multiplied in what Dahl et al. (2003) regards as the need by companies or businesses to attract attention in an increasingly competitive and hostile working environment (Erdogan, 2008).

### **2.3.6 Fear advertising**

An advertisement can appeal to fear in order to capture the attention of audiences. In their study, LaTour, Natarajan, and Henthorne (1994) present some interesting findings about arousing fear in print advertising. An advertisement intended to appeal to its audience through fear is designed to communicate the threat of danger and thus influence individual

behaviour (Tanner, Day, & Crask, 1989). LaTour et al. (1994) provide general guidelines for designing successful fear appeals. However, the purpose of their study was to provide those guidelines in the context of print advertising. Fear appeal advertisements are generally used to shock consumers and change their buying attitudes. Past research states that the bigger the fear, the more likely it is the consumer will accept the suggested pattern of behaviour in order to avoid negative effects (Higbee, 1969).

In order to gain answers to how people react to fear advertising, LaTour et al. (1994) ran an experiment where they compared two groups of subjects. The first group was shown an advertisement that was intended to scare them and get their attention. The second group was shown the same advertisement that included the “attention getting” part of it, but not the fear part. What the researchers tried to measure in this experiment was attitude towards the advertisement. There were four dependent measurements: tension, energy, calmness, and fatigue. The results identified that the group that was shown the “fear appeal advertisement” scored higher on some of those parameters compared to the “copy advertisement” group. Pearson’s correlation between fatigue and tension demonstrated that tension was not accompanied by fatigue in this particular case. Similarly, calmness negatively correlated with tension. The results also showed that the “fear appeal advertisement” group was under a lot of tension in comparison to the other group. The “fear appeal advertisement” group found the advertisement to be quite negative. However, they experienced less fatigue while viewing the advertisement. They also noted that the advertisement was less calming.

From this research, LaTour et al. (1994) developed guidelines for fear appeal advertising. Firstly, when creating an advertisement, advertisers should not promote tension but should instead promote energy arousal. This is because energy arousal advertisements are more likely to motivate, last longer, and be accepted by audiences. The authors also believe that instead of “shocking” audiences with an advertisement, advertisers should “energise” instead, an approach that is received in a more positive way. Secondly, when advertisers decide to use tension arousal in their fear advertising, they should try and use it minimally. This allows energy arousal to remain dominant with positive feelings about the advertisement. It is also important to note that if advertisers use a higher level of arousal in their advertising, they should understand that all people react differently, and that there might be some anxiety created among people, which may lead to negative feedback. Thirdly, it is possible to minimise shock in fear advertising by enforcing ethical guidelines. LaTour et al. (1994)

recommend testing an advertisement before going live in order to see how people are going to react to it. When ethical guidelines are applied, there will be a balance between the advertising message and the level of fear arousal. In conclusion, fear advertising should be used with great care.

### **2.3.7 Shock advertising**

Controversial advertising aims at shocking and/or offending audiences by violating the social norms established by society (LaTour & Henthorne, 1994; Dahl et al., 2003). Such advertising uses provocative images, words that are offensive, the ideology of death, political messages, violence, sex, and indecent body parts, considered as taboos within any society (Chan et al., 2003; Dahl et al., 2003; LaTour & Henthorne, 1994). The only purpose in this form of advertising is to draw attention to the product behind the advertisement by causing people to talk about the offensive image or text (Erdogan, 2008). Controversial advertisements are deliberately provocative, and while they may come as a surprise to the audience, the advertisers know the aim of the advertisements precisely. While it is clear that controversial advertising crosses boundaries as dictated by social norms, the public agitation against such advertising is seen as a way of promoting the brand and ensuring that the audience notices and talks about it (Huhmann & Mott-Stenerson, 2008). Controversial advertising creates interest in a product regardless of the individual's involvement in the product or its affiliates (Huhmann & Mott-Stenerson, 2008; Sandikci, 2001). Whether as product users or as non-product users, people tend to respond to controversial advertisements, and it is on the premise of interest that controversial advertising has been used as a regular element in the promotion of products (Huhmann & Mott- Stenerson, 2008).

## **2.4 Issues with controversial advertising**

### **2.4.1 Sex appeal**

Companies usually use controversial advertising to appeal to consumers faced with increasing clutter and fewer methods to attend to messages (Kadic-Maglajlic et al., 2015). Controversy can be in the form of morality, decency, sexism, nudity, and sexuality. In other instances, the use of sexual appeal in advertising might fail to appear controversial because it is executed creatively (Kadic-Maglajlic et al., 2015). This is the reason why certain products and services are considered sexual but not controversial and vice-versa.

### **2.4.2 Visual controversial advertisements**

Theodorakis et al. (2015) and Dhal et al. (2003) argue that the use of controversial advertising has increased in recent years, usually in the form of visual content rather than verbal content (LaTour & Henthorne, 1994). The visual approach reinforces the shock agenda as it results in controversies and ensures dialogue is created over the content of the advertisements. According to Theodorakis et al. (2015) and Kadić-Maglajlić et al. (2017), the more controversial an advertisement is in relation to the moral agenda, the higher the sales of the brand become. Theodorakis et al. (2015) point out that the nature of an advertisement and consumers' ideologies, when combined, can offer an element of controversy in any advertisement. The rhetoric value of any advertisement lies in its ability to violate individual moral codes as outlined by society and in so doing, create a sense of acceptance or rejection (Dahl et al., 2003). Theodorakis et al. (2015) state that when visual and rhetorical elements are employed in controversial advertising, they play on the moral code of the person viewing the visual image. The degree to which a visual representation is perceived to be morally abnormal entirely depends on the moral code of society or individuals (Dahl et al., 2003).

### **2.4.3 Social norms**

Society offers strict rules on what is acceptable in a public and/or private setting. Controversial advertising aims at creating a debate over what is considered normal within society while at the same time creating awareness of the product, service, or good. It is important to note that the sphere of controversial advertising sometimes involves the promotion of products that are viewed as being offensive in their own way (LaTour & Henthorne, 1994). Consumers are exposed to over 3,000 advertisements in a day, and the critical aim of controversial advertising is to make sure that the consumer receives the information in the advertisement (Dahl et al., 2003). Controversial or shock advertising lies between a legitimate creative concept and an attention-grabbing technique that is utilised as a weapon in the fight for company dominance. The level of shock to an audience is determined by the moral compass of a society, which means whatever is acceptable by one society may not be acceptable by another society and so on. The advertising method used should therefore depend on the target audience and its culture, religion, and moral codes.

### **2.4.4 Advertising to provoke**

Although there is a target audience for controversial advertisements, controversial advertising also evokes righteous indignation that does not have a specific target audience (Erdogan,

2008). Examples include advertisements used by the Benetton Group, a clothes-making label, that picture dead soldiers in bloody combat clothes, a dying AIDS patient in the last stages of HIV infection, and a white child being nursed by a black woman (Kadić-Maglajlić et al., 2017; Dahlet al., 2003). While over the years the label has won awards for highlighting controversial issues within the public domain, society has deemed the label a provocateur that deliberately uses challenging images within the community to sell its products.

Kadić-Maglajlić et al. (2017) offer a new term for controversial advertising: shockvertising, a combination of the words shock and advertising. The distinguishing factors within any controversial promotion are the need to arouse conversation and shock. A plain and repetitive style of advertising does not work within the sphere of controversial advertising. While similarities are bound to be found, the foundation of controversial advertising lies in its ability to reveal what society keeps private (Erdogan, 2008). The Benetton Group has used this method of advertising for the last 20 years in order to gain more attention from the public and of course, more sales. One of the main aims of controversial advertising is to draw attention to the brand. The Benetton Group uses images that are considered quite controversial by the public; however, the company wants their images to be regarded as “revealing”. They believe in socially based messages, stating that "actual consumption is repositioned within the overall context of life. By entering the universe of values, the brand frees the product from the world of merchandise and manufacturing and makes it a social being of its own" (Benetton Group, 2009).

#### **2.4.5 Gender and advertising**

Historically, advertising has been responsible for changing standards within society; it becomes a reflection of what is considered normal within society (Erdogan, 2008). LaTour and Henthorne (1994) claim that the utilisation of gender in the selling of products, where sexualised female or male images are used in advertisements, is not something new in advertising; rather, it is the norm. However, the same concept has created public outcries of immorality and indecency with reference to social norms. The premise of moral conduct is based on the understanding of moral ideology, which dictates what is accepted or not accepted within society. The use of sexual imagery is accepted in society as long as it is presented within the confines of what is considered normal.



Kadić-Maglajlić et al. (2017) question the moral authority to limit or condemn controversial advertising. The authors point out that controversial advertising can utilise sexual imagery to elicit compassion and create awareness within the public on a particular disease or epidemic, such as HIV. The year 2000 saw the use of attractive models in only bras and panties but with a significant difference: the women had mastectomy scars instead of breasts. The advertisements were intended to shock and, in the process, create breast cancer awareness (Kadić-Maglajlić et al., 2017). The moral indignation of the public was at its highest with Dahl et al. (2003) reporting that at least one media publishing house refused to print the images. However, Filopoulos et al. (2016) criticise the double standards created by society in response to controversial advertising.

#### **2.4.6 Humour and advertising**

Theodorakis et al. (2015) and Swani et al. (2013) point to controversial advertising's use of visuals and the humour factor within those visuals. The efficient use of humour can be aggressive as evidenced by super bowl commercials, which increase the controversial advertising period. The humor can also be disparaging humour in which rhetorical tendencies are displayed (Swani et al., 2013). The use of aggression within controversial advertisements is utilised in over 70% of such advertisements (Swani et al., 2013). A balance between humour and violence must be enforced so as not to offend society (Swani et al., 2013). The hidden violence within humour tends to highlight the aggressiveness or controversial content within an advertisement while at the same time appealing to audiences through humour. The use of fun can relate to traditional gender roles, according to Swani et al. (2013), who state that men prefer malicious and sexual humour while women prefer gentle and silly humour (Swani et al., 2013). The practical use of the right kind of violent humour is detailed in the emotional responses that are created through advertisements that elicit a purchase from the audience.

#### **2.4.7 Emotive advertising**

Controversial advertising creates an emotional response to a product, good, or service (Parry et al., 2013). The use of offensive imagery and wordplay manipulates the fear stimulus of consumers and thus creates conversation around the advertisement, generating information and hopefully a sale of the product. The objective of advertising, whether standard or controversial, is to create and maintain a connection with the intended consumer (Madni et al., 2013). In advertising, emotion is a tool that can be used even in controversial advertising

to create the intended outcry and promote a brand or idea. Creating an emotional response is an actual intention of the advertiser who aims to initiate dialogue and maximise the reaction to gauge market appeal or raise awareness (Parry et al., 2013). The acceptance or rejection of a brand or concept promoted by controversial advertising is dependent on the emotional response of part or the whole of society (Madni et al., 2013). Emotional reactions to advertisements are used to understand consumer behaviour. Parry et al. (2013) recognise that advertisements have the capabilities and potential to create, recreate, and shape consumer perceptions and practices based on the emotional responses offered by the consumer. The critical aspect of controversial advertising is to create a negative or positive emotional response that is directly related to the item or idea being advertised (Parry et al., 2013). The shocking imagery or words utilised are managed in such a way that moral indignation is raised, which in turn, shatters ethical boundaries while maintaining the legal borders (Parry et al., 2013). The higher the emotional response is, the better and more predictable the consumer behaviour model becomes.

## **2.5 Key themes in controversial advertising**

The following section looks at the key themes that have been identified from the literature: learned culture, religion and diversity, technology and controversial advertising, and competition in advertising. Themes that are covered below are learned culture, religion and diversity, technology and controversial advertising, competition in advertising, and subtle versus explicit advertising.

### **2.5.1 Learned culture: The effect on brand ideology and the advertising message**

Culture has a significant impact on a consumer's response to an advertisement. Chan et al. (2007) developed the concept that when the consumer is offended emotionally, their next logical step is moral indignation. The ability to offend lies within the culture in which the advertisement is being conducted. The higher the moral code of any given community is, the more elevated the indignation surrounding controversial advertising becomes. Chan et al. (2013) point out that the era of globalisation has itself created opportunities for the offensive nature of controversial advertising. What might seem to be appropriate and acceptable within one society might be a taboo in another. The moral spectrum of controversial advertising is not inclined to accept social norms; rather, it utilises these norms, resulting in a sale or the promotion of an idea. Society's moral code is based on its religion sphere (Kadić-Maglajlić et al., 2017). Moral ideology may divide society, but when controversial advertising is used, it

is more likely to unite that society in response to offensive images or words. Religious aspects, righteous indignation, and controversial advertising are the interplay of factors that promote a product or herald its failure. Traditional offensive ideology is undoubtedly being expanded to include narrow ideals as explained by LaTour and Henthorne (1994).

It is critical to understand that controversial advertising has helped in eliminating social limitations on specific issues. Culture plays a crucial part in identifying the offensive nature of controversial advertising, and it is also a critical decision-making factor during the purchase process. Culture is distinguishable and thus distinct in all its aspects (Chan et al., 2007) and it is one of the most valuable factors in understanding consumer behaviour. The acceptance of a brand or ideology within society is inherently tied to its cultural sense. Culture affects the prism in which controversial advertising is perceived and accepted. The degree of reaction and offense is related to the consumer's cultural setting and background. Consumers with high individualistic standards have a higher acceptance of controversial advertising (Chan et al. 2007). However, the approval limits of consumers and the level to which they feel offended by this style of advertising are different for each society (Sandikc, 2001).

### **2.5.2 Religion and diversity: The pros and cons of advertising messages**

Religion plays a crucial role in advertising messages. Controversial advertising is wholly dependent on the creation of conversation and public outcry based on religious doctrines (Kadić-Maglajlić et al., 2017). Religion is an influencer in everyday life and a critical factor in why some forms of advertising are termed as controversial. The concept of religion creates taboos and requirements, which are a foundation of the morally indignant response to controversial advertising. While within any society there are believers and non-believers in some religious matters, it is to be noted that they all tend to have the same values and moral hierarchies (Kadić-Maglajlić et al., 2017). Companies may approach consumers taking into account their various cultural and religious differences and backgrounds and without any intent to offend. However, the task is enormous, and globalisation has created a massive advertisement venue for major brands and consumers that makes it all the more difficult to cater to the sensibilities of all consumers.

Diversity has meant that the world of advertising is involved in a delicate act in which the level at which something becomes offensive is blurred (Parry et al., 2013). It is crucial to note

that companies do have a social responsibility to protect society from what is considered harmful in the advertising world. However, the ethical boundaries of advertising are relative to the situation and community in which the advertisement is created. A survey conducted in Pakistan with 18 graduate students showed that 70% were offended by sexual imagery, Western images, and indecent language, which is a clear indication of the influence of the Islamic religion (Madni et al., 2013).

Religious commitments and affiliations coupled with ethical parameters are the influencers of what is perceived by society as controversial advertising (Kadic'-Maglajlic et al., 2017). Moral judgment is synonymous with religious foundations, which create the moral and immoral nature of controversial advertising (Kadic'-Maglajlic et al., 2017). The utilisation of advertising that causes moral and ethical dilemmas is highlighted by LaTour and Henthorne (1994), who suggest that society has a lower-level tolerance for sexual images that depict the act of sex but are more lenient to images that suggest a sexual nature.

It is difficult to understand why there is confusion over what is acceptable within advertising and what is not in accordance with ethical boundaries and moral obligations (LaTour & Henthorne, 1994; Madni et al., 2013). Kadic'-Maglajlic et al. (2017) claim that the confusion lies in the moral judgments that religion has created based on its rules and beliefs. The creation of an advertisement is an intention to offer an existing product or brand to the consumer, to highlight a social issue, or to initiate a new brand, product, or service. LaTour and Henthorne (1994) state that the confusion about controversial advertising lies not in its image but in the underlying discomfort that the consumer regards as a morale breaker. Unlike Madni et al. (2013), who believe that moral indignation is seen within all in society, Kadic'-Maglajlic et al. (2017) highlight that the higher the community aspires in its religious beliefs, the higher the ethical judgment is and vice versa. Islamic countries have a lower level of acceptance of controversial advertising as religion is the foundation of their cultures. Western nations have a higher tolerance for controversial advertising, as their societies are less religious and more tolerant of social freedom.

### 2.5.3 Technology and controversial advertising

The advertising world has changed alongside technological innovations (Filopoulos et al., 2016). The development of social media platforms, which are now found within any cultural setting, has further compounded the challenge of what is offensive and to which culture. The utilisation of social media has forced companies to come up with better and more creative advertisements that capture the attention of their audiences and leave them with a desire to purchase a product. Social media platforms rely on advertising in order to maintain sites and ensure profitability (Filopoulos et al., 2016). The more controversial and shocking the advertisement is, the more a conversation is created about the controversy and the more the company's profile is raised, which directly translates to sales. Social media platforms have only a second to capture an audience and ensure a transaction (Filopoulos et al., 2016).

Controversial advertising utilises social media because of its ease of access, its sharing capabilities, and its ability to cross geographical and cultural norms to deliver a message. The positive side of the social media platforms that promote controversial advertising is similar to the same aspects that negatively affect companies whose advertising concepts fail (Filopoulos et al., 2016). A recent Dove soap advertisement created backlash for the company and initiated a boycott of Dove's products around the world (*The Telegraph*, 2018). The controversial advertisement depicted a black woman who gained lighter skin and became a Caucasian female after using Dove products. While the company offered apologies for this mishap, their intention with the advertisement was to highlight discrimination. The public's outcry saw its product sales dive in all markets around the globe (*The Telegraph*, 2018). The use of controversial advertising must be within the acceptable parameters of society (Filopoulos et al., 2016).

The issue of social acceptance was further emphasised when a non-profit organization called WATER is LIFE created various memes through social media that were used to generate interest in the organisation. The memes were controversial as they highlighted the differences between Third-World problems and developed nations' issues. Despite the controversy caused by the memes, the advertisements saw an increase in contributions and an increase in membership. Just recently, a famous musician was accused of using slavery as a social media-advertising tool in order to highlight challenges faced by developing nations.

These three examples are evidence of society's position on the utilisation of social media, morality, and controversial advertising (Filopoulos et al., 2016). The development of social media as the primary tool for controversial advertising has created a challenge in terms of what is deemed acceptable in society and what creates problems.

#### **2.5.4 Competition in advertising: Is controversy the way forward?**

Global competition is regarded as the primary cause of controversial advertising (Madni et al., 2016; Dahl et al., 2003). Companies are on edge to prove to the consumer that their products are the best, and thus the use of controversial advertising reflects this need with a focus on the audience (Dahl et al., 2003). The traditional advertising landscape has changed and evolved; companies are desperate to maintain their brand relevancy and thus utilise controversial advertising as a tool to show their social responsibility while promoting their products, goods, and services. Competition in various markets is fierce, and companies need to attract consumers by employing new tactics, which are created with the aim of differentiation. In order to be different, relevant, creative, and a trendsetter, companies utilise controversial advertising as the only way to counter competition (Madni et al., 2016).

Controversial advertising leaves an impression on an audience and results in the erosion of a competitor's brand in the mind of the target audience. When companies use controversial advertising, they are on a gambling mission of acceptance or rejection (Erdogan, 2008). The two ideologies go hand in hand as consumers can reject the brand due to the lack of trust in the controversial advertisement or they can accept the label based on the same advertisement. Traditionally, consumers and brands have co-existed based on the ideology of trust-based relationships (Erdogan, 2008). The relationship between a brand and a consumer goes beyond the elements of satisfaction; it is not a purchase and sale transaction. The consumer is ultimately unforgiving if and when a company violates their relationship by using controversial advertisements. They then switch to the next active competitor.

#### **2.5.5 Subtleties versus explicit advertising**

Controversial advertising promotes a hidden message that can be hidden in an image (Erdogan, 2008; Kubacka, 2012). Therefore, if the real intent of a controversial advertisement is confusing, the whole purpose of the campaign is lost. When companies use controversial advertisements in order to influence consumers, the advertisements may have no impact, and a loss of interest in the product may occur. The product may then become less competitive.

Nevertheless, Steenkamp et al. (2005) note that the nature of competition within companies is directly related to competitive reactions. The rivalry between brands has elicited controversial advertising (Erdogan, 2008); however, Steenkamp et al. (2005) observe that the same does not translate into sales. The majority of counter advertisements from competing brands fail to capture the original intention of the advertisement. They then undermine or promote rivalry; they may even promote the competitors' brands. Steenkamp et al. (2005) conducted a study via accessible data of 442 frequently purchased consumer goods and found that despite massive advertisements and promotion strategies, controversial advertising had little to no effect on sales based on competition.

Chan et al. (2007) promote the ideology of hard truths that are offered by controversial advertisements. Shock advertisements tend to emphasise the factors that society would rather not openly discuss. Kadic´-Maglajlic et al. (2017) gives an example of the soldier advertisement in which the Benetton Group raised concerns about a war the world seemed to have forgotten. The subject was so controversial that major U.S. publishing houses declined to print the advertisement. The shock value offered by controversial advertising can be in itself a call to society to challenge discrimination in all senses based on expectations that are not a creation of reality (Sandikci, 2001). While advertisers are bound by legal technicalities when it comes to advertising, controversial advertisements seem to be limited to the sphere of society's moral code; that is, the challenges provided by controversial advertising lie in the social parameters of any community (Johnson, 1990). However, the era of modernisation, which has brought about social media platforms, has laid the grounds on which legal parameters can be used to halt controversial advertising (Johnson, 1990).

## **2.6 Controversial campaign studies: Past research**

While a number of controversial advertising campaigns have been very successful, some have been very damaging to the brand. In a study by Waller (2003), 150 people were asked to complete a survey by stating which advertisements they found more offensive. The results were beneficial to all advertisers. The following case studies provide some examples of controversial advertisements that were not well received by the public.

### **2.6.1 Burger King**

In the past few years, there has been a clear increase in controversial advertising on a number of platforms. There are several reasons for this. Society has become more complicated and the huge increase in advertising has pushed advertisers to use some extraordinary methods in order to “cut through the clutter” and to gain brand awareness (Waller, 1999). Controversial advertising can either be very successful or very damaging for the brand, depending on what is happening in the current market. One example of a controversial advertisement is when Burger King advertised their seven-inch burger by showing a woman standing next to the big burger with her mouth open. The ad had the slogan, “It will blow your mind away.” The advertisement is controversial because it implies sexual acts. It can also be seen as arrogant and blunt.

### **2.6.2 Hell Pizza and Ecoya**

Hell Pizza launched its rabbit pizza in 2014 with a billboard made of 550 rabbit pelts. The billboard was placed in Parnell, Auckland around Easter time. This advertisement not only attracted local criticism but international criticism as well. Ecoya, which is a home-fragrance brand, featured a naked woman on a horse in one of their ads, which the Advertising Standards Authority found too provocative.

Controversial advertisements are everywhere. With Internet marketing being an effective tool, marketers now find themselves using controversial ads on many different platforms: Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn etc. Controversial advertising can lead to various issues such as attracting customer complaints, negative publicity, and sale losses. There is a fine line between successful communication in the marketplace and insulting consumers. The on-going issue for advertisers is to find the fine line at which the advertising campaign becomes offensive, especially when the product itself is a controversial product, for example, condoms and alcohol/tobacco products. The advertisers, especially those associated with controversial products, have a social responsibility to refrain from insulting people through their advertising campaigns. However, they should still be able to communicate their message to their consumers.

### **2.7 The case for controversial advertising**

Studies by Schuster and Powell (1987) and Wilson and West (1995) showcase reasons why some advertisements may offend some people. The main purpose of the studies was to



identify the type of people who are insulted and the specific areas of advertising that they find offensive so as to help advertisers make better managerial choices when picking a controversial advertising strategy.

Some advertisements may be perceived as controversial simply because of the nature of the product, for example, women's hygiene products, and alcohol and tobacco products. This may generate negative responses (Schuster & Powell, 1987; Wilson & West, 1995). These types of product may be perceived as sensitive, embarrassing, and offensive among other aspects when openly presented to most people.

Waller (2003) identified in his research that controversial advertising is a negative concept that comes across negatively to consumers. The negative responses to this form of advertising may result in it being banned from mass media altogether. Nonetheless, this does not stop advertisers from using controversial advertising. There has been successful use of controversial advertising in the past. For example, part of Dove's disruptive but very successful 'Movement for Self-Esteem', the 'Choose Beautiful' ad campaign encouraged women everywhere to break free from society's confining standards of beauty and declare to the world that they are "beautiful". In a video, women in different cities are asked to walk through either a door labelled 'beautiful' or one labelled 'average'. Most women pick the latter, until they recognise that they can 'choose beautiful' for themselves and begin walking through the first door with confidence. While some viewers and media outlets embraced the message as a lesson in female empowerment, others responded negatively to it. They regarded it as patronising, manipulative and ultimately a reinforcement of the rigid standards it ostensibly works to "tear down" (Moraes & Michaelidou, 2017).

Past studies have suggested that different types of services and products become controversial when advertised. These include advertisements for contraceptives, underwear, tobacco products, alcohol, as well as political advertising. Fam, Waller, and Erdogan (2002) identify four categories of controversial products:

1. Social/Political Groups (e.g., religious values, funeral services, political preferences, guns, and racially extreme groups);
2. Gender/Sex Related Products (e.g., contraceptives, female hygiene products, and male/female underwear);

3. Health and Care Products (e.g., sexually transmitted diseases and their prevention, weight loss plans, and charities of all sorts);
4. Addictive Products (e.g. tobacco products, alcohol, and gambling).

Controversial advertising has failed to work for a number of companies. Moreover, other studies indicate that provocative or shocking advertisements from for-profit (FP) firms provoke a strong emotional reaction when compared to non-shocking advertisements (Parry, et al., 2013). For example, consumers were shocked when they saw an advertisement promoting a brand of face wash on Facebook. People did not expect to see their faces on Facebook without giving them permission. The brand ruined their reputation by using this method of shock advertising. Because of this, most customers swore not to buy the company's products as they found the advertising very unethical and offensive in nature (Parry, et al., 2013). The company's advertising campaign failed because it offended most of their consumers and led to them boycotting their products and services.

Theodorakis, Koritos, and Stathakopoulos (2015) conclude that the use of rhetorical figures (RFs) indicates that most advertising agencies and companies still view these figures as the most important ingredient in securing the effectiveness of their advertising. Therefore, integrating rhetorical figures in advertisements is likely to result in fruitful relationships with customers. Research suggests that despite the negative examples, controversial advertising can be a very successful method of advertising as it triggers people's emotions and stimulates buying behaviour by using the right strategies.

## **2.8 Conclusion and gaps**

Advertising agencies and marketers need to develop increasingly creative content these days in order to catch buyers' attention. The strategy of controversial advertising meets this need for creative content. Most controversial advertisements tend to insult and shock audiences. Companies use this style of advertising for various reasons including to question or violate society's acceptable norms. The chapter looked at different case studies of controversial advertising and found that in most instances, this form of advertising generates a large number of complaints. However, studies have found that controversial advertising is very effective in targeting people's emotions; consumers are called to action – to buy a specific product/brand or to reject the product. In other words, while controversial advertising appeals to some people and increases their intention to buy a product, such advertising can also alienate many others. In fact, Waller (2003) found that the negative feedback associated with

a controversial advertisement may cause the advertisement to be banned from the mass media, resulting in financial loss and bad PR for the company. Despite the risk, most big advertising agencies continue to use this method of promotion again and again.

Based on the above discussion, the following gaps have been identified that warrant further research:

1. Does controversial advertising work in New Zealand?
2. If so, how can marketing managers manage the success of controversial advertisements and overcome inhibitors such as the target audience's religion and culture?
3. If controversial advertisements have been unsuccessful in the past for companies, will they continue to use them again in the future? And if so, why?

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to understand if a controversial form of advertising still works and also to investigate some of New Zealand's brands and their previous most complained-about advertising campaigns. This chapter will examine why a qualitative research method has been chosen for this study. The chapter will also explain how the research was designed and what factors were taken in the research design.

### **3.2 Philosophical assumptions**

Every researcher, in any kind of work or study, tends to make philosophical assumptions or brings a set of beliefs to the research question. Therefore, every research that uses a qualitative method should consider its philosophical assumptions as part of the research.

As described by Creswell (2012), there are four philosophical assumptions in a research: ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological. These are explained below in Table 1.

Table 1: Four Philosophical Assumptions (Source: Creswell, 2012).

<p><b>1.</b> Ontological</p>	<p>There is an assumption of several different realities. Researchers report these realities by identifying numerous evidences from people’s experiences and perspectives.</p>
<p><b>2.</b> Epistemological</p>	<p>Researchers get very close to the people being researched. Subjective evidence is constructed from individuals’ opinions based on the area researched.</p>
<p><b>3.</b> Axiological</p>	<p>The researcher establishes his/her values and continues to refer to these values by reporting more evidence related to the values.</p>
<p><b>4.</b> Methodology</p>	<p>By collecting and analysing the data, the researcher includes the methods used in the research: inductive, deductive, and shaped by the researcher's experience.</p>

Creswell (2012) also discusses interpretive frameworks, which are known as a set of basic beliefs that stimulate action. The philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks are used in combination together by researchers. Interpretive frameworks include social science theories, which focus on political influence, leadership, attribution, and others, and which form the researcher’s opinion on the study. Interpretive frameworks also include social justice theories that are aimed at identifying social issues in society. Table 2 provides a summarized framework of the approaches and practices utilized in these theories. There are nine approaches in total: positivism, social constructivism, postmodernism, pragmatism, feminist theories, critical theory, critical race theory, queer theory, and disability theory. For example, in positivism there are logical, related steps, differing opinions from respondents, and the use of computer programs to collect and analyze the data. Each practice uses a different approach and method.

Table 2: Summarised Framework of Approaches and Practices (Source: Creswell, 2012).

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Practice</b>
Post-positivism	Post-positivists believe in an objective reality but consider all research potentially flawed: the truths found from research today may be replaced by better truths in the future.
Social constructivism	Open-ended questions look into the historical and cultural background of participants, understanding that their background forms their perceptions.
Postmodernism perspectives	Focus on ethnography, participants' biography, and grounded theory.
Pragmatism	Researchers apply different methods to answer the research question/questions, focusing on the research issue.
Feminist theories	Focus on participants' background in order to test the validity of their interpretations, their reporting of women's voices, and their self-disclosing methods of reporting.
Critical theory	Focuses on how society thinks. Requires interactions and intense case study. Forms new models and uses social psychology.
Critical race theory	Focuses on transformative solutions by including racism in the base of the research process.
Queer theory	Uses a postmodern focus to reflect on identity-related theories, analysing how human sexuality is historically linked with identity.
Disability theories	Use disabled participants to investigate if labels are made. Communication methods are applied and community views are sourced.

Post-positivism is the chosen framework for this research paper (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As per the above table, post-positivists are happy with either quantitative or qualitative

research methods, depending on which one helps answer the research question (Creswell, 2012). Since the research examines four different brands/case studies, it considers the truths found in current research, which may be replaced by better truths in the future.

For the purpose of this research study, an inductive qualitative approach has been chosen, as it is regarded as the most appropriate method to answer the research questions.

### **3.3 Qualitative research**

This research aims to identify if controversial advertising works, or if it does not, and why brands choose this method of advertising. The study examines several different company brands and analyses their previous campaigns that were considered to be controversial and the most complained about by the public. The goal is to understand if the marketing managers of those brands were aware that their campaigns were seen as controversial, if they tried to shock audiences, if they tried to trigger people's emotions/feelings, and if the campaigns were successful in regard to marketing objectives. Therefore, a qualitative research methodology has been chosen for this research.

The goal of a qualitative research study is to examine phenomena that impact the lived reality of individuals or groups in a particular cultural or social context (Mills & Birks, 2014). Qualitative research allows the researcher to ask questions where respondents answer in their own words. In qualitative research, it is important to pay attention to the words, body language, and intonations of respondents in order to understand their perspectives, ideologies and beliefs. The researcher must stay neutral on the subject at all times in order to ensure that the opinions of respondents are not influenced in any way. To be successful in this, the researcher must not express his/her own belief or knowledge or suggest any answers.

The selected qualitative methodology for this study is the case study method. This method is appropriate to the subject of controversial advertising as it helps to determine in what cases it works and in what cases it does not.

### **3.4 Case study method**

The case study method is the most adaptable method in qualitative research. It provides a descriptive report of one or multiple case scenarios, where it is possible to tell a story

about events that took place at the time and the behavior of people involved. The case study method tells a story from the actual event, which can involve a showcase of a situation or a problem faced by a company or an individual (Kadushin, 2004).

The case study method is used in this research because it is important to look at the previous events for each selected brand and analyse these case by case. Mass media publications of each case are utilised.

Four case studies are used for this research: Hell Pizza, NZTA, 30 seconds and 2cheapcars. This is a case by case study. A story is written about each case that incorporates interviews from the participants. According to Yin (2003), the single case study must:

- exemplify a case and be able to develop an existing theory
- exemplify a specific situation and show the actual event/situation relevant to the story.

### **3.5 Research methods**

Methods are a set of steps and procedures taken to collect data and analyse it according to the research question/questions. The steps include the selection of participants, data gathering, data recording, data analysis, and reporting the research study. The methods used in this research involve phone interviews, which will be analysed using thematic analysis and case studies to help create a better case for each brand.

#### **3.5.1 Thematic analysis**

Thematic analysis is often used in psychological practices as well as in applied behavioral, social, and health sciences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This type of analysis is also useful to this research because it will help to identify the patterns and common themes within the collected data. In order to identify these patterns and common themes, the in-depth interview transcripts must be read through carefully. The researcher then notes words, sentences, and common phrases. The researcher must be focused on the research question when searching for common threads in the text. The researcher then deletes the less important themes/meanings while remaining focused on the research subject. This is also



known as the reduction and minimisation of data. The themes/common threads must relate to the main subject and show some important relations to the research question. Next, theme codes are created and data are allocated to each group code. Similar codes may signal a sub-theme, which provides a more detailed explanation of the research subject. Normally themes are given a definition that can explain the complexity holistically (see Table 3). There are six phases of thematic analysis: familiarisation with the data, coding, theme search, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mills & Birks, 2014; van Manen, 2016). Table 3 provides a short description of the process for each phase:

Table 3: Six Phases of Thematic Analysis (Source: Braun and Clarke, 2006).

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Description of the process</b>
<b>1.</b> Familiarization with the data	Reading and re-reading the data, transcription of the collected data, noting down initial observations.
<b>2.</b> Coding	Labeling any interesting data in an analytic way, classifying data relevant to each code using NVivo software.
<b>3.</b> Theme search	Classifying codes into different themes, collecting all data relevant to each contract theme.
<b>4.</b> Reviewing themes	Checking that all themes match in accordance with the codes extracted and the entire data set. Preparing a thematic map of the analysis.
<b>5.</b> Defining and naming themes	Writing an analysis of each theme, identifying how each theme fits the overall picture of the researched subject. Producing meanings and names for each theme.
<b>6.</b> Writing up	Selecting extract examples from the transcripts, relating background analysis to the research subject and writing up five stories based on this.

There are two different ways in which thematic analysis allows the identification of common threads/patterns: an inductive or bottom-up approach (Frith & Gleeson, 2004), or a theoretical deductive or top-down approach (Boyatzis, 1998). The main difference between inductive and deductive approaches is that a deductive approach focuses on testing the existent theory, whilst the inductive approach focuses on generating a new theory from the data collected. A deductive approach normally begins with a hypothesis or proposition, whereas an inductive approach uses questions in order to find the answer to the research question of the study (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach concentrates on exploiting the new theory/ideas or looking at things differently from the previously established hypothesis. The aim is to analyse the data collected and then build a new theory based on the findings from that data.

It is important to understand which approach is more suitable for the research, based on the goal of your research.

The goal of this research is to understand the motives and reasons that drove marketing managers to go ahead with a controversial method of advertising, identify if they will use the same method in the future, examine customer complaints, and measure the success of the campaigns. Thematic analysis will allow the gathering of rich and detailed information that will help answer the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **3.5.2 In-depth interviews**

During in-depth interviews the researcher is a data collector who asks respondents a variety of questions that are relevant to the research question and the industry they are in, letting them answer in their own words without being led to any specific answer. It is important not to lead the respondents to any particular answer in order to get their opinion on the research problem. The questions should be open-ended, which allows the researcher to understand the respondents' experiences, beliefs, motivations, attitudes, and feelings relevant to the research problem.

The aim of using in-depth interviews for this research was to generate a full understanding of when controversial advertising works and when it does not work. The interview style was semi-structured, which meant that the researcher asked the respondents a series of questions.

Firstly, an interview guide was produced (see Table 4), which contains a set of questions related to the research problem. Questions were open-ended and specifically chosen to gather related information during the interview. The flow of the interview conversations was expected to be relaxed and fluent, although a structured set of questions was prepared beforehand. This gave the researcher flexibility while interviewing marketing managers and the ability to ask additional questions when needed. Every interview was recorded with the consent of the respondent and then passed on to a data analysis transcriber.

### **3.6 Research design**

Below is an explanation of how this research was designed and was applied.

### **3.6.1 Preparation**

The preparation of this research started by planning the in-depth interviews and the procedure to be used during these interviews. Firstly, there was a need to decide who would participate and who would be best suited for a discussion on the researched subject. It was also highly important to understand what was the best way to approach the selected respondents, whether by email, phone, or any other possible method. In order to start the process, a PGR1 (postgraduate research proposal) was submitted to Auckland University of Technology and approved prior the start of the process. A second document sought ethics approval for the research proposal as required by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH). The approval was granted by AUTECH on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018 (see Appendix A).

It was decided to contact four marketing managers of five different brands who have participated in four of the most controversial and complained-about campaigns in New Zealand over the last few years. The marketing managers were found on the internet and contacted via email, followed by a phone call. The main condition for them was that they had to be significantly involved in the creation of the controversial campaigns selected. The interview consent form (see Appendix B) and participation information sheet (see Appendix C) were sent out to all selected candidates inclusively, accompanied by an introduction letter from the researcher and the organisation that supported the research, Auckland University of Technology.

The participation information sheet included information about the research itself – why the research was being conducted, what the purpose was, where the interviews would be held, and the contact details of the research supervisor.

The interview consent form included information about confidentiality and the rights of participants during the interviews, as well as their permission to be recorded during the interview for future transcription of the data. The potential participants had a few days to come back to the researcher until they were followed up with a phone call and/or a follow-up email.

The interview guide was designed and approved prior to contacting the participants (see Table 4). The interview guide was designed to keep the researcher on track and able to dig

as deeply as possible into the research problem and gain answers from participants. The guide included main topic questions about controversial advertising. The structure also helped to ensure the research objectives were being met and not forgotten during the interviews.

The main topic questions of the interviews aimed at discovering if respondents felt their campaigns were controversial, if they received many complaints, if they would use the same approach in the future, and how they measured the success of the campaigns, which may have been seen as controversial by some people. Probing questions were included to ensure answers to the main topics above. The questions were designed based on a literature review conducted prior to designing the research structure.

All four participants could only commit to an interview over the phone due to other commitments at work. Dates and times were set up accordingly with each participant.

Table 4: Interview Guide

Question numbers	Questions
1	Do you consider your campaign was controversial? Yes/no? Why?
2	Why do you think people complained?
3	Do you think shock advertising is effective? Why do you think it works?
4	Is this why you went with this approach?
5	Shock advertising tends to trigger people's feeling/emotions, sometimes negative ones too. Was this your aim?
6	Were you concerned about your brand's reputation when implementing a controversial campaign strategy?
7	Based on past experience, would you consider using a controversial method of advertising again? Yes/no? Why?
8	Why did you think controversial advertising would work for your brand in the past?
9	Was there any negative feedback on the campaign?
10	Bad PR is still PR?
11	Was the campaign successful? How did you manage success?
12	Going ahead, what is your marketing/advertising plan for the future?

### 3.6.2 Participants

The participants were not hard to find – all it took was an internet search and a couple of phone calls in order to track the right email address for the person selected. The main condition required for the participants was that they were in a marketing management and/or assistance role and were involved in the campaign that caused all the complaints. The participants also needed to be willing to share their experiences and relevant information related to a particular campaign and their brand. All four of the participants were living in Auckland, New Zealand and at some stage were involved in the creation of the "controversial" campaigns selected. Table 5 provides a breakdown of the participants, their age, gender, occupation, residence, and company.

Table 5: Profile of Research Participants

<b>Respondent:</b>	<b>Gender:</b>	<b>Age:</b>	<b>Occupation:</b>	<b>Residence:</b>	<b>Company:</b>
<b>R1</b>	Male	25-32	Assistant Marketing Manager	Auckland	2CheapCars
<b>R2</b>	Male	35-45	Director/Owner	Auckland	Hell Pizza
<b>R3</b>	Female	35-45	Advertising Manager	Auckland	NZTA
<b>R4</b>	Male	35-45	Marketing Manager	Auckland	30 Seconds

### 3.6.3 Data Collection

The interviews were conducted over the phone due to the work commitments of the participants. The interviews were conducted in a home office equipped with a tape recorder, interview guide, and a notepad. The interview started by ensuring the participants were relaxed and comfortable by telling them a bit about the researcher and why this was the chosen thesis topic. Prior to the interview, the participants signed the interview consent form. This notified them that the interview would be recorded and that everything they said would be transcribed for the purpose of this research. All of the interviewees were happy with this and had no problems with their data being collected and analysed.

The interview structure was not formal; rather, it had a focused structure. This helped the participants to feel that they could be more open about their opinion on the subject of controversial advertising and it created a good atmosphere between the researcher and the participants. The interview was based on the interview guide in order to keep it on track. If there were any additional questions during the interviews, those were also asked.

It was important to let the participants talk freely without pressuring them, while listening to their tone of the voice. The interviewer stayed neutral on the subject, no matter what the interviewees response was. The interview sessions each took 15-20 minutes to complete. After each interview was finished, the participants were reminded as per the participant information sheet that they could choose to receive a final copy of the findings of this research, however, only one participant chose to do so. Based on the nature of the interviews and the offer of no reward, it was clear that the quality of the interviews was not affected as participants fully volunteered for this research.

Once all interviews were completed, four audiotapes were sent to an independent transcriber. After the transcripts were received, the researcher checked them in order to make sure the content of the audio tapes matched the transcription content, and that there was no additional information added or words missing.

It was helpful to re-listen to the tapes and read the transcriptions in order to become familiar with the content and to be reminded of what each interviewee had to say about the subject.

#### **3.6.4 Data analysis**

As discussed previously, the chosen perspective when undertaking thematic analysis for this research was a realist perspective. The approach in this type of research consisted of looking at meanings, experiences, and realities of the four participants of the research paper. At every stage of the research process, the researcher adopted a reflexive attitude and attended systematically to the context of knowledge construction (Creswell, 2012).

NVivo, a data analysis software package, was used to conduct this research. NVivo is software that helps researchers deal with large, word-based data by arranging, sorting,



classifying, and organizing the data, thus enabling an understanding of the relationships within the data as well as an opportunity for analysis.

After all four transcripts were uploaded into NVivo, the researcher started the analysis process. Firstly, the researcher read and re-read each transcript several times, noting down ideas or anything of interest within the transcript. At the same time, the researcher familiarized herself with the data and began to develop explanations of the data. Secondly, the researcher needed to produce codes. Coding is when the researcher assigns a label to a section of data, using a short phrase or a word. Codes classify features of the data that are attractive to the research and which are fundamental parts of the original dataset.

Coding is also consistent with the organization of the basic data into significant sets of groups. Table 6 shows an example of how the data was coded.

Table 6: Data Extract and Codes Applied

Data extract	Codes
"I think it's controversial because a lot of people think cute little bunny rabbit and Easter eggs, so I don't really know how those two are connected."	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. If the campaign is controversial</li> <li>2. Campaign description</li> <li>3. Why a controversial method is being used</li> </ol>

At this stage, the researcher began to look for different themes based on the codes created. The themes needed to capture something significant about the data in relation to the research question and deliver a sequence of logically related information within the data. Once the themes were established, multiple codes and their meanings were organized and classified into these different themes.

The next stage involved sorting the themes identified in the previous stage in order to create a more logical understanding of the information in the dataset. The supervisor checked the developed themes. The researcher then worked intensively to delete themes that did not serve the purpose of this research, along with very similar themes that were no longer important. The remaining themes were then sorted into a logical order. The

researcher was then able to sort the themes and identify sub-themes strictly related to the research subject of controversial advertising and which led to some interesting assumptions.

After identifying the different themes and sub-themes, the final stage was to write an explanation and interpretation of each of the codes. Explanations of each theme related to the information shown in the data are presented in Chapter 4. Clarifications offered in the data in relation to this research are supported through the literature review and are discussed in Chapter 5.

### **3.7 Reliability and validity**

The information gained by the researcher from the interviewees and external resources (see Table 7) provided validity for the qualitative research (Creswell, 2012). The researcher's supervisor checked every stage of the research procedure. The themes and the codes produced during the thematic analysis were carefully selected, organized, and put into a logical pattern by both the researcher and the supervisor before the conclusion stage. Doing so increased the credibility of the research, which relates to the confidence of the findings in this research and the context explained (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). In the next chapter, the findings will be presented.

Table 7: Secondary Resources Used

<b>Secondary resources:</b>
1. <a href="http://www.campaignbrief.com">http://www.campaignbrief.com</a>
2. <a href="http://stoppress.co.nz">http://stoppress.co.nz</a>
3. <a href="https://www.newshub.co.nz">https://www.newshub.co.nz</a>
4. <a href="http://www.stuff.co.nz">http://www.stuff.co.nz</a>

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Chapter 4 presents the findings from the primary and secondary data in the form of four case studies. Firstly, secondary background findings are presented on each case study, followed by the findings from each interview. All the findings are linked with the theories presented in the discussion chapter.

Secondly, cross-case analysis is presented based on the research question – does controversial advertising work? The analysis first refers to secondary information found on the internet, followed by information gathered from interviews with the four marketing managers. In the interviews, respondents discussed the outcomes of controversial advertising, how they managed their success, and if they would ever use a controversial method of advertising again. The gathered data was further defined using NVivo analysis and themes were identified.

### **4.2 Case One: Hell Pizza**

Callum Davies is one of two Hell Pizza owners. He started this business on his own 20 years ago out of a small store in Wainuiomata, New Zealand. Prior to that he was a store manager, a pizza maker, and a deliveryman for a couple of local pizzerias. He then decided to get a loan and open up his first store. It all took off from there. Interestingly, Hell Pizza has never needed to advertise for franchisees – instead, franchisees approach the company. Callum Davies and his brand have been known for controversial ads: the “Lust” pizza promotion, where they put a condom in each pizza box; the “Easter Bunny” promotion, where they put rabbit skins on a billboard; and the “Hell Cross Buns” promotion, where they talked about Jesus. Callum believes that Hell Pizza is a brand with a lot of freedom and different takes on things, along with a “funky” store environment.

Hell Pizza has 66 franchises around New Zealand and it is known for its “shocking” advertising methods. In fact, Ben Cumming, who is the company’s General Manager, says that the company only has two marketing people, who manage the marketing and advertising side of things alongside the two owners, Stu McMullin and Callum Davies. National marketing is done in-house by award-winning agency Barnes Catmur & Friends.

The small team work very closely with each other and come up with some scandalous ideas, ideas that other companies would never utilise. The team believes that if they were any different, they would not be successful.

Hell Pizza is known for its controversial marketing campaigns. Callum Davies has no problems apologising to the public for these campaigns, even though he believes that there is nothing wrong with a bit of humour:

*We've just said what other people think, that was our mantra, it was never for the sake of shock – we came up with an ad or something cheeky simply because we thought it was hilarious.*

There have been a number of complaints to the New Zealand Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) over controversial campaigns that include Hell Pizza's 2006 campaign for "Lust" pizza (meatlovers), which involved sending out condoms in the promotion material, and a rabbit skin billboard for their 'Easter Bunny' campaign in 2014 (see Figure 1 below). According to Stuff.co.nz, Hell Pizza was featured in the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) top 10 most complained-about ads between 2006-2012.



Figure 1: Hell Pizza "rabbit skin" billboard

In the interview for this research, Callum Davies was asked to talk about the rabbit skin billboard as it caused a number of complaints but also created some positive feedback. Callum does not appear to believe that their campaigns are of a controversial style:

*I think people were just offended we'd take a cute bunny rabbit and put it on a pizza, and I know that the billboard we use for it.... So we used the rabbit skins from the rabbits that we used on the pizzas – we used the skins as the billboard. And to be honest, we didn't really think a lot of people in New Zealand complained about that, but we did get a big response from other countries. Like we had CNN in America call us up about it, which was – yeah, the Americans, for them it's like us putting cat on a pizza. But I mean, quite a few people actually eat rabbit over here, but I think in America they don't. They were just like – Oh my God, I can't believe you're doing that!*

### **4.3 Case Two: NZTA**

Rachel Prince is Principal Advisor for the New Zealand Transport Agency (NZTA). Rachel manages the National Road Safety Advertising Programme. Rachel has been in this role since 2002 and loves working for the organisation because she can work towards keeping everyone safe on the roads of New Zealand.

All of the NZ Transport Agency (NZTA) campaigns are aimed at persuading people with messages that essentially, they do not want to hear. It is not that easy to cut through the clutter when the campaign is plain and boring. Therefore, NZTA and their advertising agency BBDO have to come up with something that is going to catch people's attention and make people think. The main problem is that it is quite hard to reach audiences, especially with government ads and the fact that consumers are exposed to a number of different screens a day.

The campaign that was discussed in the interview was the “Thoughts” campaign in which two men who had smoked cannabis went for a drive, with tragic consequences (see Figure 2 below).



Figure 2: NZTA “Thoughts” campaign

According to Rachel, they tried to create a realistic example of a day-to-day situation experienced by a number of people and show them the possible effects of driving while “stoned”.

Some of their famous campaigns, including the “Ghost Chips” campaign and the “Mistakes” campaign, have struck a chord with millions of people. NZTA is always looking to create a “catchy” campaign in order to influence the public. The interview was based on asking questions about the “Thoughts” campaign. Two men are in a car, clearly “stoned”. The driver is trying very hard to stay focused on the road, but it is difficult for him because he is high. The whole situation finally turns into a disaster. The ad shows what can go wrong on the roads. The goal of the ad is to reach out to Kiwis and dispute the myth that smoking cannabis makes you a calmer driver, as Rachel states in her interview:

*They think that while they're impaired they're more patient, calmer and slower drivers, so they believe that that's a better thing.*

Rachel does not believe that NZTA campaigns should be considered controversial because their aim is show people the actual outcomes from drink driving and consuming drugs before driving:

*We're not intending to shock people. I think that's certainly not our intention. It's not about shocking people, it's about.... There is a much different depth to the campaign than that. With the drug campaign that you're referring to, that's about getting people to understand they're slower to react to other people's mistakes, and that bad stuff*

*can happen because of that. It's not centered around the fact that we're going to show a crash.*

#### **4.4 Case Three: 30 Seconds**

Alan Nees works for a company called Award Concepts. Award Concepts assists organisations such as schools and businesses in general to engage people so the business can grow. They help motivate and manage employees so they can perform at their best. Alan Nees was directly involved in creating the controversial “Spray and Walk Away” campaign for 30 Seconds. 30 Seconds is a cleaning brand, which has been on the New Zealand market for about twenty years. Their products are made in Matamata. 30 Seconds believe they deliver affordable and quality cleaning products to their customers. They distribute their products though big chains such as Mitre 10, Bunnings, PlaceMakers, Hammer Hardware, Countdown, and The Warehouse, and also throughout Australia. Alan also manages several other brands: Hardware, Medalist, Damp Rid, Heat Beads, and Dynalink.

The 30 Seconds “Spray and Walk Away” campaign involves an Asian man demonstrating some of the cleaning product by spraying it on a surface. There is humour in the advertisement but not at the expense of the man’s race. The humor is in the character, the funny “professor” who is an expert in cleaning (see Figure 3 below).



Figure 3: 30 Seconds “Spray and Walk Away” campaign

Many reviewers did not like the “Spray and Walk Away” advertisements at all, calling them racist and demonising. The character’s accent, language, and looks led to complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority.

According to Alan Nees, the actor was randomly chosen for the campaign, and the advertising agency were not specifically looking for an Asian actor. The Asian man chosen happened to fit the “professor” look they were aiming for. He was funny and fitted their campaign well. The actor himself does not believe that it has made him look ridiculous:

*My name is Ming-Jen Huang and I appear in the television commercial for 30 Seconds Spray and Walk Away.*

*I wish it to be known that I am very proud of my performance in this commercial and feel that in no way does it undermine or offend the Asian community.*

In fact, people continue to recognise him on the streets. ASA dismissed the public complaints, as the campaign was unlikely to cause any harm or offence to the public. Alan Nees also does not believe the campaign was controversial:

*I wouldn't consider this advertising to be shock advertising, but I think that it can work simply because it has cut-through, and one of the big challenges for any advertising to actually get people to watch and listen and absorb.*

#### **4.5 Case Four: 2 Cheap Cars**

James Goodwin was interviewed for this particular case. James works closely with Chloe Zang, who is a senior marketing manager and graphic designer for the 2 Cheap Cars company. Chloe has previous experience working in Hong Kong as an art director. She has also worked in China developing and creating both digital and print design for a wide range of print and online campaigns, publications, and advertising.

2 Cheap Cars has been mentioned a number of times in the local press and shown as an example of “bad advertising”. One of their most complained-about campaigns was the



“Screaming Girl”, which the public regarded as depicting bullying, and should be banned from TV.



Figure 4: 2 Cheap Cars “Screaming Girl” campaign

Another was the (Ah So) “Ah Sold” campaign, which was the subject of the interview with James Goodwin. Some consumers found the ad racist as it had an Asian man featured in the ad who did not speak much English (see Figure 5 below).



Figure 5: 2 Cheap Cars “Ah Sold” campaign

Interestingly enough, the director of 2 Cheap Cars is Asian himself and apparently, “Ah so” is a saying in his home country, Japan:

*I can see how it is controversial. The initial idea wasn't meant to be controversial, but the saying Ah So is actually a popular thing in Japan, so that's the whole thing with it being Japanese cars and the Asian guy saying.*

However, some people heard “asshole” instead of “Ah so” or “Ah sold”. This was the most complained-about ad in 2016, as found by the Advertising Standards Authority. 2 Cheap Cars removed the advertising voluntarily.

When James was interviewed, he had some interesting things to say about the campaign and the complaints it has caused. James maintains that they wanted the ad to be memorable but did not expect people to react this way:

*I don't think we realised it was quite going to be received like that. It was just meant to be like a short thing.*

When James was questioned about brand reputation, he shared that the company had received a few complaints in the past and that they currently preferred to keep it “low-key”:

*Well, we're not planning on anything at the moment. We're keeping sort of low key at the moment with just normal adverts rolling out at the moment, yeah. But nothing in the future to try again, I guess.*

James also shared that 2 Cheap Cars would definitely use a controversial method of advertising again if they have to as they feel it has proved successful.

In the interview, James mentioned that the campaign was also supported by the *Jono and Ben* TV show, which helped to create positive reactions to the campaign as well as free PR. This is a prime example of when bad PR becomes good PR as it does not cost anything to the brand itself. According to the respondent himself, bad PR is good PR because it gets the company name out there.

2 Cheap Cars regard the controversial advertising method as being suited to their needs but because they are big enough these days, they do not need to shock their audience:

*Yeah, I think we're big enough now that we don't need to sort of shock everyone and get in trouble.*

#### **4.6 Cross case analysis**

This section analyses six different themes obtained from the thematic analysis using NVivo software. These themes reflect how the four interviewees see their past campaigns, how controversial they think those campaigns were, what results they expected from their “shocking” campaigns, how they see their brand within the controversy, what they think about customers’ complaints and feedback, and if they used a controversial method of advertising in order to stand out and break through the clutter of other campaigns, or if they just wanted to trigger the audiences’ emotions.

#### **4.7 The use of controversial advertising**

Out of the four case studies, 2 Cheap cars responded positively four times when questioned on using the controversial advertising method in the future:

*Sort of try it again.*

*Well, we're not planning on anything at the moment. We're keeping sort of low key at the moment with just normal adverts rolling out at the moment, yeah. But nothing in the future to try again, I guess.*

*Yeah, we'll try and stay away.*

*Yeah, I think we'd consider it, but whether or not we'd actually go through with it could be a different story. So that wouldn't be just up to me, it would be up to a few people. So it's hard to say about that, actually.*

Hell Pizza answered positively three times:

*Because that's what our marketing's famous for, is being able to do controversial campaigns and be able to get away with it, when we feel a lot of other brands wouldn't be able to do a campaign like that and get away with it. So yes, absolutely.*

*We don't set out to go and do some shock marketing, we just have – this year we've got six different new pieces coming out which limits the 17.01, and I guess we'll just advertise it then in the kind of fun, hellish way that we can.*

*They'll still be controversial, absolutely, I think, yeah. We wouldn't be Hell if we weren't kind of a little bit controversial. We try not to stay on the same side when we're marketing, we're not afraid to ruffle a few feathers.*

2 Cheap Cars and Hell Pizza are very positive about using controversial advertising again. 2 Cheap Cars is happy to use it again sometime in the future but retain a “low key” position at the moment, unlike Hell Pizza, who believe that the controversial method is a “hellish way” and they want to have fun with their brand. Hell Pizza is not afraid to take it to the next level.

Although 2 Cheap Cars has some good things to say regarding controversial advertising and the experiences they have had with it, they also have something negative to say. Despite have some interesting outcomes when using this method, 2 Cheap Cars have decided to stay away from it for now:

*Well, we're not planning on anything at the moment. We're keeping sort of low key at the moment with just normal adverts rolling out at the moment, yeah. But nothing in the future to try again, I guess.*

*Yeah, we'll try and stay away.*

*Try and stay away from it a little bit, yeah.*

*I think just play it safe and normal sort of thing, yeah.*

30 Seconds, are also quite hesitant of using this method again, fearing a negative consumer response. They prefer to play it safe and to deliver the message using other methods of advertising:

*Controversial, quite possibly not. If I believed it to be offensive, definitely not, but I would be quite happy to apply the same logic of looking for something with cut-through that was likeable and entertaining.*

*Well, I'm not sure it would, but if I was considering it, I would be wanting to weigh up the potential negative impact from people disliking it, versus the potential positive impact from getting cut-through, being able to deliver a message and hopefully people liking it.*

In the Hell Pizza interview, Callum gave a very interesting opinion about why the controversial method of advertising continues to be used in their campaigns. Firstly, they would like to get noticed; even if it involves shocking people in order to cut through the clutter – they are prepared to do it. This method of advertising also fits with the marketing they do and gets the response they expect from people. For Hell Pizza it is important to be clever with their advertising as they want people to talk about the brand:

*Because it gets noticed, it gets people talking about our brand, and also people engaging with our brand, whether that's buying our product or talking to their friends who buy the product. But I guess if you're front of mind that's a good objective that can be ticked off for any campaign, to be front of mind.*

NZTA provided a few interesting comments about whether or not the controversial advertising method works. They believe it would not be effective if marketing managers used the same method every single time. However, NZTA believes the method works well when combined with another method. They typically run a couple of drink/driving ads in conjunction with each other, where one will be controversial and the other will be focused on giving people options concerning what they should be doing. NZTA also believes that using the controversial advertising method again is dependent on the goal of the long-term campaign. A campaign can be very effective not because it is shocking people, but because it delivers the right message to the audiences.

30 Seconds advised that they strongly believe that bad PR (public relations) is not good PR and that companies must be quite desperate if they are happy with bad PR. The same opinion was expressed by NZTA who believe that bad publicity is not good publicity,

although this is dependent on a case-to-case scenario. In contrast, 2 Cheap Cars and Hell pizza both agree that bad PR is good PR, it still gets the name recognized.

#### **4.8 The brand and controversy**

The main character of the 30 Seconds campaign has become famous since the ad went live; people recognise him on the streets and ask him for autographs. This shows a positive outcome from the campaign, with no ill feeling when people see the character or the advertisements.

Hell Pizza admits that they will never use “cute bunnies” for their campaigns, simply because it does not fit their brand image:

*But to get that fluffy bunny and put it on a pizza, that absolutely is Hell all over.*

NZTA does not want their brand being seen as controversial. They do not use controversial advertising on purpose and instead choose what they feel is best for their audiences. NZTA works closely with an advertising company on strong briefs and together they test them to see what kind of reaction are likely to get from target audiences. Whatever comes out the most strongly will direct the course of a campaign.

Brand reputation is very important for all four respondents. After a couple of controversial and most complained-about ads, 2 Cheap Cars is trying to stay away from this method of advertising for now:

*We've never kind of been known as the.... but we're trying to break away from it a little bit.*

*Yeah, I think we're big enough now that we don't need to sort of shock everyone and get in trouble.*

30 Seconds uses the example of the main character of their controversial campaign and stresses that it is important to balance the number of complaints versus the likability of the main character.

Hell Pizza are also concerned about their brand reputation. They are happy to consider using this method of advertising as long as it is clever and stands out.

NZTA are far more serious on the subject, always undertaking a qualitative research before they create a campaign. They believe that because everything they do is for people and their safety, it is important to take things very seriously.

2 Cheap Cars are happy to take things slowly at the moment as they have had enough of complaints over the last couple of years. They prefer to focus on sales and remain “low-key” at the moment.

Hell Pizza plans to always use the controversial method of advertising as they believe there will be no Hell Pizza brand without it. They do not want to just use the method, they want to be clever about it and attract as much attention as possible.

30 Seconds advised that their plan is to continue to monitor what they are currently doing, that is, to gauge a campaign’s effectiveness, the potential level of complaints, and the community’s feeling about their advertising.

NZTA is working in conjunction with police enforcement to create effective advertising, whether or not such advertising is controversial. Their aim is to deliver the message and be effective.

#### **4.9 Results expected**

All of the interviewees feel their previous campaigns were a big success. 2 Cheap Cars are grateful that their name became recognised. They have found that people are now more curious and are more likely to come into their sales yards, where the salespersons can then attend to their needs.

30 Seconds believe their campaign was very successful. The success has driven awareness of the brand, as well as its sub-brands. They are also aware that some of the catch phrases in the advertisements, particularly “Look, I spray and walk away”, became part of the popular vernacular. They have found no issues in managing the success of the campaign.

Hell Pizza's rabbit pizza campaign was highly successful. They sold out of the rabbit pizza in two weeks, making it one of their most successful campaigns:

*The rabbit pizza was – we sold out; within the first week we sold out of that pizza, so it was really, really popular.*

In the case of NZTA, the campaign is ongoing, and it is therefore difficult to measure its success at this point in time. It is the very beginning of a long-term drink and drug/driving campaign and too early to measure success and behaviour change. NZTA tracks all of their advertising on a day-to-day basis with a research company, and they look deeply into who is seeing it, whether they are recalling it freely, and the messages taken from it.

#### **4.10 Personal beliefs if a campaign is controversial**

In the interview, all respondents were asked if they see their campaign as being controversial. Hell Pizza agrees that the campaign was controversial because people associate Easter with a "cute little bunny". The result of the campaign was that the public talked about Easter in a whole new way.

2 Cheap Cars feels their campaign was controversial because people might have found it racist, although this is not something they feel about the campaign.

*"A lot of people might think it sounds a bit racist or something. I mean, I don't quite get.... 'cos I've been to Japan a few times and I know that it's not.*

30 Seconds also agree that their campaign was controversial in a way because of the main character's ethnicity:

*And, in actual fact, I suspect if he had been an old white guy, there wouldn't have been anywhere near the degree of controversy and complaints that there have been.*

NZTA disagrees that their campaign is controversial; they simply want to deliver a message to their audiences, not judge the public on their behaviours:



*No, I don't, because we're not making a judgement call on the use of drugs. We're just simply asking audience to not drive if they're impaired.*

NZTA is seeking new and fresh ways of delivering their message and if this involves some seeing their advertising as controversial, they will still go ahead with.

#### **4.11 Customer complaints and feedback**

In 30 Seconds' opinion, the public complained about their campaign because they believed that the brand was denigrating the actor based on his age, appearance, and race; however both 30 Seconds and the actor dispute this. However, 30 Seconds understands that if people are offended by their advertising, they are likely to lose some of their audience. They still receive occasional letters from people complaining about the advertisements; however, overall, 30 Seconds feels the complaint level has been quite low.

Hell Pizza's campaign received complaints from many different sources. People posted negative feedback on their Facebook page, emailed them, and some phoned Hell Pizza to show their anger. Even CNN from America got in touch:

*Yeah, the Americans, for them it's like us putting a cat on a pizza. They were just like – Oh my God, I can't believe you're doing that!*

Overall, Hell Pizza do not feel the public was overly critical and they were expecting a level of negative feedback.

2 Cheap Cars also received complaints in a variety of forms. For them this was a surprise as they had not anticipated reaction to their campaign escalating to that point.

NZTA point out that people love to complain about their work in general. Following the campaign, they received numerous complaints from cannabis users. People also posted online, sent emails and made phone calls. Despite the complaints, there was also positive feedback about the campaign.

#### **4.12 Controversial advertising as a means of standing out**

All four marketing managers explained that if their campaigns were controversial, it was because they were trying to stand out from the clutter of advertising. NZTA feels their ongoing campaign is reasonable; their aim is to deliver a message and the only way to do this is to use advertising that may be regarded as controversial. 2 Cheap Cars wanted to create memorable advertising that would encourage people to visit their sales yards. 30 Seconds wanted to create advertising that was fun and chose to use an Asian “professor” as their main character who was an expert at cleaning. Hell Pizza firmly believes that each advertising campaign has to be greater than before. It is their “hellish way” to shock people. They would not be their brand if they did things any differently.

Generally speaking, the campaigns of all four brands had the same goal – to cut through the clutter and stand out. Using a controversial method of advertising may have caused the brands grief at times but also a lot of success. Clearly, there is not necessarily anything wrong in using this method of advertising as long as guidelines and strategies are in place. These include creating advertising that adheres to a country’s current laws and which respects the morals and beliefs of that country. Further, advertising should not bring any negativity to the advertising profession by upsetting people in general; anything negative and aggressive should be prevented (Jethwaney, J. & Jain, S. 2006).

## **Chapter Five: Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This final chapter discusses the research findings. Firstly, the research questions are revisited. The controversial methods of advertising used by four case study companies are discussed followed by identification of the theoretical contribution of this thesis. It is important to see how the findings compare to the existing research reported in the literature review chapter. Subsequently, managerial contributions are presented, identifying how the research findings can contribute to businesses in New Zealand. Lastly, the limitations of the thesis and future research ideas will be discussed.

### **5.2 Research problem revisited**

The research sought to answer the following questions: Does controversial advertising work and why do some controversial marketing communications work while others fail? According to the interviews conducted and the answers received from the marketing managers of the four researched brands, controversial advertising does work. However, controversial advertising does cause complaints and negative feedback from some consumers. There are risks involved when using such methods of advertising that include customer complaints, bad publicity, and brand reputation damage. This can result in the removal of advertisements from public viewing, thus causing financial loss for the business (Waller, 2003).

Hell Pizza is a prime example of when controversial advertising works. The findings chapter discussed in detail that a few of their controversial campaigns, for example, the “Easter Bunny” campaign, were quite successful. Hell Pizza sold out of rabbit pizza very quickly. Although the campaign attracted many complaints, including complaints from overseas, Hell Pizza believes that this method of advertising fits perfectly with their brand image and they will not use any other methods. Hell Pizza also pointed out that their aim is not to shock people but to find a unique “hellish” approach to attract more customers.

NZTA is a brand that is involved in promoting road safety. In order for them to succeed in making a statement, they need to come up with creative content that cuts through the clutter by using “shock” advertising. However, NZTA stated that they do not see

themselves as a brand that uses controversial advertising; rather, they are more like a team of creative people who work in conjunction with New Zealand Police in order to create “catchy” content. NZTA is mostly concerned about citizens’ safety on roads, so unless they show people possible outcomes from drink/drug driving, it will be hard to make their statement.

2 Cheap Cars were also successful with their controversial advertising; however they now prefer to stay away from using such methods in the immediate future. In response to the campaign, they received a lot of free publicity, including a mention on one of New Zealand’s most popular TV shows, where they received endorsement for their clever use of advertising methods.

Generally speaking, all four brands researched for this thesis have had their success when using controversial advertising methods. According to the interviewees, all the brands received a lot of free publicity and their profits were much higher than usual,.

Although controversial advertising has failed to work for some brands in the past, the four brands researched for this thesis show that controversial advertising may work for a brand as long as there are proper strategies in place. Targeting people’s emotions can be detrimental to brands, but very effective in some cases.

### **5.3 Theoretical contribution**

Advertising agencies are forced increasingly forced to create innovative advertising in order to maneuver through the clutter of today’s advertising. Three main theories were applied in this research: Attribution theory, Minimal-effects theory and Cutting-edge theory. The literature review also discussed how anxiety, demographics, and globalisation need to be taken into consideration when focusing on the controversial method of advertising. Firstly, in order to understand how customers may react to controversial advertisement, Attribution theory was applied to the research. The theory explains how customers reflect their experiences with their behavior and thinking processes (Heider, 1958). Secondly, it was interesting to see what effect advertising has on consumers’ buying habits. In order to understand that, Minimal-effects theory was applied to this research. Lastly, Cutting-edge theory was applied to this research as it was important to

understand how marketers behave in the competitive advertising world and what they are prepared to do in order to cut through the advertising clutter.

According to the research findings, Hell Pizza creates campaigns that fit into their “hellish” brand image and people that love the brand will continue to buy pizza from them. On the other hand, people it is unlikely that people who do not like the brand will buy pizza from them anyway. According to Attribution theory, advertising cannot change people’s behavior and opinion of the advertising, whether they like or the brand.

It is important to understand that there are trends in advertising that marketing managers must take into consideration: the process of information, anxieties, changes in demographics, globalisation, happiness, and the authenticity of the advertising message. According to this research, all four brands, especially, NZTA, are very aware of trends that attempt to cut through the clutter, deliver the message, and as a result, stimulate purchasing behaviour or, in the instance of NZTA, change habits and raise awareness.

It requires a lot of thought and creativity to come up with an interesting advertising content. NZTA, 2 Cheap Cars, Hell Pizza, and 30 Seconds are constantly working on creating “catchy” advertising that may or may not be controversial. Some is more extreme than others.

#### **5.4 Managerial contribution**

This research presented some useful findings for marketing managers who may be considering a controversial method of advertising. Firstly, marketing managers could consider controversial advertising if they have a problem in cutting through the clutter of other advertisements, or if there is a problem in gaining awareness of the brand, or if the company would like to make a statement that distinguishes it from other brands. Once the problem is identified, marketing managers can apply the theories presented in this research, discover some interesting findings from previous research, and decide for themselves if controversial advertising is suitable.

The results of the research show that controversial advertising can work if there are guidelines and strategies in place. Marketing managers should study the demographics of

the region they are planning to advertise in as well as the religious views and social norms of the society.

Risk is another factor marketing managers should be aware of when thinking of using a controversial method of advertising. If an advertisement is highly offensive, it is likely to incur public complaints, a decrease in sales, bad publicity and damage to the reputation of the brand, and removal of the advertisement from all mass media. While some of the brand managers interviewed for this research believed that bad publicity is still good publicity, it is important to understand the consequences such publicity may cause.

### **5.5 Implications and future research**

Cutting through the clutter is one of the biggest challenges for marketers, as a result, businesses are considering trying controversial methods of advertising for their brands.

The first implication for marketing and advertising managers is that when planning to create a controversial campaign, managers should be very familiar with the result and publicity it may cause, how it will affect their profits, and the consequences that may arise. When interviewed for this research, all four marketing managers discussed their success with using this method of advertising; however, some did not reflect on how their campaign may come across to their audience. Some of them, for example, Hell Pizza, were very strategic in what they created, while others, such as 2 Cheap Cars, were less so. It appears that in order to be successful in using controversial methods of advertising, marketing managers must have a strong reason for using such methods as well as strategies in place in order not to offend audiences if they wish to make more profit for their businesses.

Secondly, it is also very important to study the cultural preferences of the country involved before embarking on an advertising campaign. Culture, religion, and beliefs are very important factors when considering controversial advertising. By ignoring these factors, marketing managers can fail massively and damage a brand's reputation. There is a fine line between triggering emotions that lead customers to purchase a product, versus insulting customers and putting them off completely.

Marketing managers should undertake an in-depth analysis of the culture and norms of the current market. Also, before going ahead with controversial advertising, marketing managers should firstly search out other options. Choosing a controversial advertising method can be very risky, unless, as in the Hell Pizza case, this is the image of the brand the managers are aiming for.

These implications were identified based on the findings of four brands as well as the review of the past literature. The goal of this thesis was to find out if a controversial advertising method works and if it does, in which circumstances. Within this research, marketing managers can find some useful tips about this method of advertising. These implications will help marketing managers to more carefully consider controversial advertising methods, apply in-depth current market analysis before any application, and try other methods before choosing such a risky option to create a campaign in the hope of gaining customer attention and increased profits.

While this research aimed at addressing most of the important questions surrounding controversial advertising, there are other areas that can be further researched in the future.

By conducting four interviews and writing up four case studies using secondary sources, the researcher tried to provide quality information. Future research could focus on a quantitative methodology with a bigger sample size, for example, the Australian market compared to the New Zealand market. This would provide results from a different prospective.

Also, it would be interesting to interview several people in the same company and then compare their opinions of controversial advertising. Interviewing marketing managers and no one else in the team does not give a detailed team opinion, which could be quite helpful when writing up a case study and getting the feel of a brand.

## **5.6 Conclusion**

This thesis undertook an analysis of how New Zealand brands use controversial advertising methods. It also looked at feedback from customers and how these brands manage their success and customer complaints. Four well-known brands were selected for

the research. The data was collected through primary and secondary sources. Firstly, the secondary data was examined, followed by four in-depth interviews.

According to the findings of this paper, it can be concluded that controversial advertising does work and can be very successful for businesses. It is important to note, that some businesses prefer to stay away from controversial advertising methods, as it is too risky for their brands. Others would not have it any other way. Four case studies describe four different situations with similar findings – all of them have been successful in their use of a controversial method of advertising.



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## Appendix A

### Ethics Approval

3 May 2018

Ken Hyde

Faculty of Business Economics and Law

Dear Ken

Re Ethics Application: **18/84 Why do some controversial marketing strategies work while others fail**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 3 May 2021.

#### Standard Conditions of Approval

1. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using form EA2, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
2. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using form EA3, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form: <http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics>.
4. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
5. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval for access for your research from another institution or organization then you are responsible for obtaining it. You are reminded that it is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and

grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organizations is of a high standard.

For any enquiries, please contact [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz)

Yours sincerely,

Kate O'Connor

Executive Manager

**Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee**

Cc: [hays.mila@gmail.com](mailto:hays.mila@gmail.com)



## Appendix B

### Interview Consent Form

*Project title:* Why do some controversial marketing strategies work while others fail?

*Project Supervisor:* Professor Ken Hyde

*Researcher:* Mila Hays

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 9/05/2018
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audiotaped and transcribed.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes  No

Participant's signature:

.....

Participant's name:

.....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

Date:

***Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 3 May  
AUTEC Reference number 18/84***

*Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.*

## **Appendix C**

### **Participant Information Sheet**

#### **Date Information Sheet Produced:**

16/03/2018

#### **Project Title**

Why do some controversial marketing strategies work while others fail?

An Invitation

My name is Mila Hays and I would like to invite you to participate in my research regarding understanding why do some controversial marketing strategies work while others fail. This research is being conducted as part of my Master of Business degree from Auckland University of Technology.

#### **What is the purpose of this research?**

The aim of the research is to understand why some controversial marketing strategies work while others fail. The identification of any gap will assist New Zealand's universities to provide greater value in their degrees.

#### **How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?**

You have been chosen as the brand manager for a New Zealand brand whose advertising campaign has been identified in the press as being provocative or controversial, or you are an advertising executive for that campaign. Your contact information has been obtained from your company website.

#### **How do I agree to participate in this research?**

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You will be invited to sign a consent form for participation in the interview.

You can choose where the interview will be conducted – for example, at your office of work, or a local cafe.

**What will happen in this research?**

The interview will focus on discussing a controversial advertising campaign in relation to your brand, how successful or unsuccessful the campaign was and so on.

With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded. You will be offered the opportunity to review the transcript of the interview, after the transcript is prepared and prior to the commencements of data analysis. You can request any sensitive information to be removed from the transcript.

You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed, or allowing it to continue to be used. Once the report of findings has been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

**What are the discomforts and risks?**

Given the nature of this research, the small sample size, and the participants' reputation within the industry, it is possible that someone may recognize them from any information they provide. I will endeavor to protect your identity but I can only offer you limited confidentiality in this research.

**How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

I will endeavour to protect participants' identity but I can only offer a limited confidentiality in this research. If there were anything participants would like to remove from the interview transcripts this will be done accordingly.

**What are the benefits?**

By completing the interview, the researcher will have gained insight regarding the controversial advertisements produced in New Zealand and how it affected brand outcomes. The findings of the research will be of value to universities in their design of marketing courses to meet the needs of industry.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

You will not be asked for any information that will effect your brand or your company's reputation. However, given the small selection of controversial ads in New Zealand, only limited confidentiality is possible. You are potentially identifiable due to the association you have with the brand.

**What are the costs of participating in this research?**

There is no cost in participating in the research. The interview may require up to half an hour of your time.

**What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

Please take up to one week to decide if you want to respond.

**Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

If you would like an Executive Summary of the research results when they are complete, please request by emailing here - [hays.mila@gmail.com](mailto:hays.mila@gmail.com).

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Ken Hyde, [ken.hyde@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ken.hyde@aut.ac.nz), (09) 921 9999 ext 5605

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, Kate O'Connor, [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz), (09) 921 9999 ext 6038.

**Whom do I contact for further information about this research?**

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

**Researcher Contact Details:**

Mila Hays, [hays.mila@gmail.com](mailto:hays.mila@gmail.com), (022) 350 2810

**Project Supervisor Contact Details:**

Assoc. Prof. Ken Hyde, [ken.hyde@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ken.hyde@aut.ac.nz), (09) 921 9999 ext 5605

**Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 3 May  
2018, AUTEK Reference number 18/84.**