

“Skin Shades” of Marriage: Viewers’ Perspectives on Controversial Skincare TV Advertisements in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

With the massive use of skincare products among Malaysians, advertisements for these products are becoming more targeted and personalised, but at the same time, they are also becoming more intrusive and misleading. Therefore, the present study aims to identify the controversial elements portrayed in these skincare TV advertisements and analyse whether these elements are deemed viable marketing strategies by the target audience. A questionnaire adapted from Lester’s Six Perspectives of Visual Communication was distributed to 140 skincare users. Results from the questionnaire revealed that most respondents perceived the approach used by the skincare companies in their advertisements sampled in this research to be highly controversial in terms of their different approaches. Male viewers showed their strong perception on the importance of controversial consideration to produce any skincare TV advertisements. This was based on their perceptions towards the same advertisements presented with the controversial idea that the shade of the skin would determine the stability of the marriage. However, a thorough review should be conducted on these controversial advertisements to ensure they do not violate the target audience’s moral beliefs. By having a specific guideline on the advertising code of conduct, it will ensure that the advertisements will be well-received by them despite the controversial approach. Future research can be done to focus on the different levels of consideration shown by viewers from the old and new generations for more informative findings on this style of advertisement.

Keywords: Visual Communication, Controversial Advertising, Skincare Products, TV Advertisements, Marketing Strategy

1. Introduction

According to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2009), Malaysia has undergone some changes from traditional ways of advertising to a digital form. The current advertising process is evolving from the existing representation of planning and negotiating the purchase of media space to get clients’ or advertisers’ approval of communication needs. Over the last two hundred years, advertising companies have been the agents of media space, purchasing pages or sections in newspapers (Azuizkulov, 2013). However today, business environments are

more complicated. multifaceted in terms of their products. For example, banking products such as loans now have insurance facilities and can be subscribed online by their customers.

Digital advertising is rising to become one of the most famous platforms of advertising in widely promoting many types of advertisements on health and skincare, education, entertainment, and any other relevant businesses Fatima et al., (2022). Some short clips of common TV advertisements follow the footsteps of being also advertised on the digital version of their TV platform. These TV advertisements are commonly known by viewers and advertisers as short commercials. The purpose of TV advertising is to promote a specific brand with engaging advertisements and shorter commercial breaks for viewers. The revised video length of a product or brand advertisement tends to be shorter than the original version when released on TV. In Malaysia, Hee and Yen (2018), highlighted that several skincare companies or brands would initially come up with longer advertisements which became shorter when aired on television. However, the original version would be posted on their website, YouTube channel or social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) as a form of marketing strategy to deliver the message more effectively. Digital advertising is preferred over TV advertising because the latter form tends to be more expensive than product placements on social media. Likewise, advertisers and big companies will earn more by reaching wider viewers from all walks of life on social media as due to the pervasive nature of the advertisements compared to the advertisements aired on television.

In Malaysia, the cosmetic industry has become a common and popular category among young and middle-aged adults as it identifies them with a more relaxed lifestyle, greater versatility, and comfort (Azuizkulov, 2013). This has prompted several manufacturers to begin increasing their businesses mostly in Asia as it has the potential to give them the top sales volume of their manufactured goods. Apart from that, many companies, mainly those in the skincare industry, set their target in the Asian market because they want to increase brand loyalty among their customers. Azuizkulov (2013) also stated that brand loyalty is a consumer's conscious or unconscious decision that is expressed through the intention or behaviour to repurchase a particular brand continually. To increase brand loyalty among viewers in Malaysia, cosmetic brands will develop more TV advertisements to be aired especially on Malaysia's popular screen broadcasting and entertainment platforms.

Studies conducted on skincare advertisements on television platforms mostly focus on linguistics, perspectives, and communication styles in terms of language used, characters' portrayal (i.e., culture, age and status of actors and actresses), and the technical aspects of advertising style itself. However, there has been an increasing number of studies on controversial advertising deemed to be an effective marketing strategy in creating a positive or negative impact on the brand itself consciously or unconsciously. Amini et al. (2023) further elaborated that regardless of the platforms, this type of advertisement has violated certain codes of conduct regulated by the government or advertising policymakers. Hence, advertisers are generally made aware of not using the method of controversial advertising in promoting their products or brands.

However, Mukattash et al. (2023) have found that controversial advertising can be an impactful form of advertisement with increasing validation of the public if the violation is accompanied with an awareness message. Furthermore, Chan and Mansori (2016) also supported the use of controversial advertising as a concept or method that must not be merely viewed negatively for its potential benefit to be more successful than sad advertising, humour advertising, and the typical style of advertising due to its public impact that can continually be in the viewers' mind if being used in a good concept. According to Lester (2013) and De Mooji (2021), gender discrimination and the use of the naked body as tools of promotion, and sexual discrimination are a portrayal of

controversial advertisements that are common in several Western countries, India, Japan, and Thailand. The public still accepts these advertisements because they spread awareness and are not seen as controversial, even though they violate the code of conduct.

Although many studies on controversial advertisements have been conducted on both broadcast and printed forms of advertising in many parts of the world, studies focusing only on one type of broadcast advertising, such as TV advertising, especially in Malaysia, have yet to be done extensively. Because of the current development of controversial advertising in Malaysia, especially in skin care advertisements, this study aims to identify the controversial elements portrayed in these skincare TV advertisements and analyse whether these elements are deemed viable marketing strategies by the different segments of target audience. Thus, the following research questions were constructed to seek more information about the aim of the study as follows.

1. What are the respondents' demographics and the descriptive patterns of their perceptions towards controversial elements in the controversial skincare TV advertisements in Malaysia?
2. Are there any significant differences in the male and female respondents' consideration perceptions towards controversial elements in the controversial skincare TV advertisements in Malaysia?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Advertising in Malaysia

According to the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2009) also known as the MCMC, Malaysia has undergone some changes from traditional ways of advertising to the digital form. This is supported by recent studies conducted by Qader et al. (2022) and Jan and Ammari (2016) in which they agreed with the fact that the world used to be so traditional that the only form of advertising that companies were able to do was by putting up advertisements in the business section on newspapers, articles, flyers, brochures, and posters. The most advanced method was renting a billboard to promote services or any forms of products. However, the business environment today is getting more complicated, and the digital industry is expanding where advertisers are eager to use various social media platforms to connect with their existing customers and potential consumers.

Over the years with the increasing number of new media advertising (also known as digital advertising), advertisers who are still using the traditional strategy are expected to gain the least in market value as they need to be more creative to reach the market segments (Gurrieri et al., 2016). Furthermore, Fatima et al. (2022) mentioned that new media is well known and commonly used by all generations in the 21st century where advertisers can easily utilise the new media functions such as "share", "forward", "copy and paste", and other functions to make advertisements well known in the online world. New media advertising can influence the relationship between advertisers and their consumers whereby they will 'move' from the traditional way of broadcasting advertisements to more interactive platforms. New media advertising services include social media advertising by means of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and other social media platforms, mobile advertising, online entertainment advertising, gaming advertising and the list goes on.

Advertisers must adapt to the revolution of new technology to stay relevant in the industry and compete with their rival companies (Advertising Standard Advisory, 2014). However, in adapting to the new trend, advertisers must abide by the Malaysian Code of Advertising Practice, also

known as The Code, regulated by the Advertising Standard Advisory (ASA) of Malaysia in 1977 which was revised in 2014. The Code contains general instructions that are relevant to all forms of advertising in all sectors, be it in the medical sector, education sector, children and young people related sector, and other sectors. The regulations require advertisers to have the responsibility for providing the truth, being ethically appropriate, avoiding offence in all aspects, not misleading or offending people, and being accurate. There are eight (8) Codes outlined in the Malaysian Code of Advertising Practice book by ASA (2014) that advertisers need to follow to showcase a good play of advertising strategy. The purpose of having all the aspects of The Code written is for advertisers to be true to their viewers without hurting people of all cultures and beliefs, giving misconceptions or false information about their advertisements

With the development and The Code prepared for advertisers and companies in producing appropriate advertisements in Malaysia, several studies related to Malaysian advertisements were conducted by research scholars. Commonly, studies conducted in Malaysian advertising will be in terms of consumers' perceptions, attitudes and purchase attention, celebrity endorsement, as well as usage of online platforms in advertising (Dom et al., 2016; Al Mamun et al., 2023; Saad et al., 2022). Most scholars believe in improving 17 per cent of the marketing (advertising) field and will find ways to improve consumers' purchases to adapt to the new generation and current technological tools. The necessity of looking at the linguistic, visual, or technical executions, and sensitivity are not thoroughly explored in Malaysia, but several scholars did look at these three aspects (Yoon and Lee, 2022; Abd Rahman et al., 2020; Mohd Jafar and Ahmad, 2022; Manaf and Alallan, 2017). The overall studies done in the advertising field later were found to be most popular in the consumers' acceptance and the effect of language used in printed brands based on the statistics done by the Advertising Standard Association in 2014. According to Syed Mukhiar (2022), despite the rising popularity of controversial advertising in 2008, it was still a taboo to discuss and address this concern publicly. In addition, many companies would simply avoid addressing their contentious issues explicitly which resulted in scholars' lack of further interest in examining this element of advertising in the context of Malaysian advertisements.

2.2 TV Advertisements in Malaysia

TV advertising is one of the popular forms of advertisements for most products in Malaysia such as cosmetics, grooming essentials, skincare, and many more. According to Azuizkulov (2013), cosmetic products are common and popular among people of all ages as they provide them with a simpler lifestyle, flexible usage of the brands and a feeling of comfort. Due to its popularity, manufacturers of the brand need to be more active in increasing their sales, especially in Asian countries to increase the number of sales and profit. Most cosmetic companies will find ways to improve consumers' loyalty towards their brands, avoid losing their existing consumers, and at the same time aim to gain new consumers or customers. Chan and Mansori (2016) also mentioned that consumers' decision making either consciously or unconsciously can be seen through their behaviour of either sticking to a specific brand that they like or changing their preferences.

Azuizkulov (2013) also highlighted that due to the increase of brand loyalty shown by consumers to their skincare products, advertisers can easily reach out to the loyal consumers with an appealing advertisement. In doing so, advertisers must consider the cultural aspects of each race in Malaysia. Advertisers need to investigate what would be the sensitive issues commonly associated with each race in terms of their culture, religion, demographic background, and anything necessary for advertisers to not create any advertisements that can cause negative feedback from their consumers. Moreover, advertisers also need to take note of which platform can be the most effective one and can reach a wider audience. Most advertisers found that TV advertisement was

the most effective medium of product advertising especially in the skincare industry because advertisements that were broadcast, could also be uploaded and shared worldwide online (Sebastian et al., 2012).

In producing TV advertisements, advertisers need to ensure that the advertisements do not contain any controversial issues or aspects, advertisers need to consider and be sensitive when it comes to representation or symbolism, as well as the language used in the advertisement such as the script or dialogue used in the storyline. However, in their effort to attract more consumers or customers, advertisers sometimes forget that the representation displayed in the advertisement may be controversial (Sen, 2017). Consumers have the idea that an effective TV advertisement considers the sensitivity of races and gender, simple but interesting, and funny to laugh at but understandable. De Mooji (2021), Sen (2017) and Azuizkulov (2013) showed similar view that the two factors are the evolution of media marketing and the use of humourtising (humour/funny advertising) and shockvertising (shocking advertising or controversial advertising) are the two recent concepts that advertisers tend to use either intentionally or unintentionally.

2.3 Controversial Skincare TV Advertisements in Malaysia

In the Asia Pacific region, several studies have been conducted on the use of controversial advertising especially in China, South Korea, Japan, India, Thailand and even Malaysia. The purpose of these studies is to spread awareness about the positive impacts of how the advertising world can further evolve their method of advertising by using controversial issues for the benefit of the company or brand as well as to highlight certain issues that the public should be aware of.

In Malaysia, studies on controversial advertising are commonly done to discover about the advertisements of clothing and medical industries which focus on religious and racism issues (Kamalul Ariffin et al., 2022; Md Isa et al., 2022). In terms of headlines, clothing brands and healthy lifestyle promotion in Malaysia are the top two common industries that often use controversial factors (Mort, 2013). These controversial advertisements would always appear in most broadcast advertising before the year 2017 as reported by statistical analysis done by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2009). However, a Malaysian skincare company produced a controversial advertisement in 2017 that gained international media coverage and backlash for portraying a woman's skin transformation from darker to brighter skin to win the King's heart which led many media reports from NST, MalayMail, Berita Harian, and others started to mention the necessity of controlling controversial advertisements in the skincare industries.

Because of the controversial advertisements by the skincare company that were negatively accepted by the public locally and internationally, the media has started to investigate other skincare advertisements from broadcast advertising and new media advertising. It was found by MCMC (2009) that around 61 cases of controversial skin care advertisements had violated The Code (Advertising Standard or Advertising Rules). Most of the cases regarded as controversial by the viewers were from skincare TV advertisements. However, no actions were taken by the authority to remove these advertisements. Abdullah et al. (2019) highlighted that the most controversial skincare TV advertisements in Malaysia are still being shown even when they have received criticism. This is typically because of the advertising fees that the companies have already paid to the media companies. Once the advertising fees have been made and specific terms have been agreed, it will be hard for the government to take an action against the companies or advertisers if the TV advertisements do not follow the proper procedure (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2009). In addition, controversial advertising on

TV is considered an increasingly acceptable new norm in the advertising industry in which advertisers are allowed to do so and is considered an appropriate marketing strategy in the advertising industry (Abdullah et al., 2019; Zakaria, 2013; Hashim, 2008).

However, Zakaria (2013) argued the Malaysian Code in advertising created by ASA as being ineffective enough. He further highlighted that several steps should be taken into consideration for approval of an advertisement regardless of the platforms (including personal or company website, and company social media). In that way, the government can monitor the content of the advertisements produced. Currently, only traditional advertising (newspaper, magazine or any printed 21 advertising through printed forms) is monitored by the government to ensure that it is appropriate to be shown to the public but not the broadcast media and the new media (Poh-Chuin & Mohamad, 2016). Poh-Chuin and Mohamad (2016) further explained that it is hard for the government to monitor the content from broadcast media and new media advertising especially the skincare industry because most of them are personalised brands that have their own website and social media. The fact that Malaysia does not have a specific body to monitor the content of advertisements is dangerous to the advertising industry (Advertising Standard Advisory, 2014). Since controversial advertising is considered one of the new norms in the advertising field as a marketing strategy, ASA (2014) and MCMC (2009) predicted that similar controversial skincare TV advertisements will be aired or uploaded again, there is possibly a greater lack of advertising control in the digital world in the coming years.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Sampling

This study employed a non-experimental research method with a quantitative approach. This study applied survey and descriptive research designs. The study sought to assess public opinions on controversial skincare TV advertisements. Thus, convenience sampling was chosen as the preferred sampling method to ensure that the findings could be used to visualise the expected outcomes in accordance with the objectives of the research. To do so, a questionnaire via Google Form was distributed on mainstream social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and X to reach netizens with diverse backgrounds. The sample size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan (1970) Sampling Method Table as proposed by De Mooji (2021) in his study on controversial advertising in which a total of 200 respondents were selected as the sample size. Hence, based on De Mooji's (2021) sample size, this study also targeted around 200 respondents but managed to get a total of 140 respondents who willingly participated in answering the survey.

3.2. Instrument

The main instrument used for this study was a questionnaire attached with sample videos of two skincare TV advertisements. The TV advertisements used for this research were previously broadcasted Malaysian TV advertisements, which were downloaded from the open-access broadcasting stations' YouTube channels. As for the questionnaire, it was composed of a set of questions created through Google Forms and distributed using social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, X, and Facebook due to their convenience to gain more respondents from various backgrounds. The questionnaire for this study was adapted from De Mooji (2021), Sen (2017) and Lester (2013) who conducted similar studies on controversial advertising.

The questionnaire contains three sections: (A) Respondents Demographic Profile, (B) Respondents' Perspectives on the Skincare Advertisements and (C) Respondents' Controversial

Consideration on The Skincare Advertisements. The total number of items in the survey is thirty questions. The respondents rated their perceptions on the 5-point rating scale based on the two videos that they have watched. The survey was distributed for around three weeks.

3.3. Data collection and Analysis

Afterwards, the raw data was transferred to SPSS for further testing and analysis. Statistical analyses used in this study included Mean Distribution (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) which were conducted after the data collection procedure and then reported in the following results section.

4. Results

In this section, a descriptive summary is provided in Table 1 which shows the mean and standard deviation scores of eight different controversial elements in the controversial skincare TV advertisements in Malaysia. Descriptive analysis of a mean distribution and standard deviations were used to find out which items had the highest mean score, and which one had the lowest mean score based on the eight controversial elements. Next, Table 2 is presented to report on an independent sample *t*-test analysis to examine the differences in the perceptions between male and female respondents towards controversial advertisements. This analysis sought to find out if gender had an impact on the perceptions of the respondents and if the differences were significant or otherwise.

4.1. Demographic

25.7 per cent of the respondents were males while 74.3 per cent of the respondents were female. For the respondents' age range, 13.6 per cent of the respondents were below 18 years old, 72.1 per cent were 19 – 30 years old, 2.9 per cent were 31 – 40 years old, 4.3 per cent were 41 – 50 years old and 7.1 per cent were above 50 years old. As for their education background, about 7.9 per cent were SPM students, 5 per cent were STPM/Matriculation/Foundation students, both Diploma and bachelor's degree students had the same percentage which was 35.7 per cent and 15.7 per cent were postgraduate students. Lastly, as for the respondents working status, 30 per cent were employed while 70 per cent were unemployed.

4.1. Controversial Elements in the Controversial Skincare TV Advertisements in Malaysia

Data from the survey were analysed using SPSS. A descriptive summary is provided in Table 1 which shows the mean and standard deviation scores of eight different controversial elements in the controversial skincare TV advertisements in Malaysia. Based on the survey conducted, the results above were run by using a mean distribution test to find out which items had the highest mean score, and which one had the lowest mean score based on the eight controversial elements.

Table 1. Descriptive summary of the controversial elements

Controversial Elements	Mean (<i>M</i>)	Std. Deviation
Personal Opinion (COC1)	4.10	.88
Past Experiences (COC2)	3.89	1.01

Good Marketing Strategy (COC3)	3.15	1.29
Different Approaches (COC4)	4.17	.92
Advertising Sensitivity (COC5)	3.80	1.09
Government Banning (COC6)	3.68	1.19
Reward & Recognition (R&R) Implementation (COC7)	3.88	.91
Reward & Recognition (R&R) Awareness (COC8)	3.65	1.02

As shown in Table 1, the element of “Good Marketing Strategy (COC3)” obtained the lowest mean score ($M = 3.15$) compared to other elements. Meanwhile, the element of “Different Approaches” demonstrated the highest mean score ($M = 4.17$). As for the other seven (7) remaining elements of Personal Opinion (COC1) ($M = 4.10$), Past Experiences (COC2) ($M = 3.89$), Advertising Sensitivity (COC5) ($M = 3.80$), Government Banning (COC6) ($M = 3.68$), R&R Implementation (COC7) ($M = 3.88$), and R&R Awareness (COC8) ($M = 3.65$), their scores were considered to be within the middle or moderate range of scores among all scores shown by the respondents.

Overall, it can be concluded that the elements of personal opinion, past experiences, sensitivity, restrictions by the authority, reward-recognition implementation, and reward-recognition awareness, were not perceived by respondents to be the most and the least important controversial elements seen in the controversial advertisement. Instead, the different approaches used as part of the controversial element shown in the advertisement was perceived by these viewers to be the most important element, thus indicating that being different is the most important feature of a controversial advertisement. Despite the above finding, the viewers still perceived that this controversial form of advertisement was not a good marketing strategy that could be used by advertisers. This shows that a strong perception of the taboo element among these viewers was still prevalent with controversial advertisements in spite of their acknowledgement of its unique way of advertising a product in the Malaysian context.

4.3. Gender Perceptions on the Controversial Skincare TV Advertisements in Malaysia

Table 2. Results from Independent Samples Test for overall controversial consideration by gender

	Gender	N	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Controversial Consideration (AVECOC)	Male	36	3.93	.55	3.25	0.045
	Female	104	3.74	.46		

Table 2 shows an overall perception shown by respondents based on their gender in terms of their controversial consideration of the advertisement. There was a significant mean difference in terms of gender ($t = 32.5$, $p = 0.045$) between male and female respondents ($N = 140$) in their consideration of controversial advertisements. Male respondents perceived that advertisers could have taken greater controversial consideration into their production of advertisements which was not perceived with the same levels of perceptions by female respondents. It can also be concluded

that male viewers showed stricter perception towards controversial advertisements than their female counterparts, thus validating the common belief that these male viewers were more critical of the controversial skin care advertisements portrayed to the Malaysian context.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the above findings, the viewers of this survey perceived the controversial skin care advertisements to have the most significant element of applying different approaches, making them to be a distinct feature of controversial advertisements. According to Kadić-Maglajlić et al. (2017), controversial advertising is a recent famous method to viral a brand's advertisement to trigger reactions among the consumers and advertisers should take on different approaches in their controversial advertising style. Advertisers tend to get creative and unique so that advertisers can gain the attention of their consumers by levelling up their advertisements to a new level of advertising so that they can compete with their rival companies (Van Dijk, 2013). However, based on further analysis of the findings, it was found that viewers did not appreciate this controversial advertising to be a good marketing strategy as it affected consumers' views towards an issue and violated the ethical standard of advertising in Malaysia according to the Advertising Standard Advisory (ASA) and their renewed code back in 2014. This is because one of the two skincare TV advertisements portrayed a husband who was abusing his wife because of her skin shade, and imposing the wife to have fair skin and a slim body to ensure happiness in a marriage, hence violating Code 2, 3 and 5 in which the Code 3 of ASA which clearly state that, "Advertisements must not identify or typecast each particular racial group or sex with vocations, traditional values, and backgrounds".

In terms of the viewers' perception of controversial consideration, it was found that male viewers had stricter and stronger perception towards the inappropriate elements of controversial advertisements than their female counterparts, thus implying their concerns of the values of the controversial skin care advertisements shown to the public. Wang et al. (2018), asserted in terms of controversial consideration, the content of the advertisements determines whether it is controversial or not and if the advertisements are considered controversial, and gender plays an important role in deciding the level of controversy. Gender will have a different result depending on the issue that is highlighted by advertisers in their TV advertisements. However, in terms of the controversial content of the advertisement associated to the issue of domestic abuse in Malaysia, 70 per cent or majority of the Malaysian male viewers who viewed domestic abuse as an important issue and not something to be promoted or misused in an advertisement as evidenced in a survey conducted by MCMC (2009) and Aziuzkulov (2013) in their reports on this issue.

6. Implications and recommendations

In terms of the implication of the present research on the current body of knowledge, it can be suggested that female viewers were rather more open to the idea of controversial consideration, thus adding on the current research perspectives about the male viewers' less tolerant and dominant perception on the importance of controversial consideration in terms of accepting the same forms of controversial advertisements.

7. Limitations and future research

Future research can be explored by examining the potential reasons of the different levels of consideration shown by both male and female viewers and if the same pattern is applicable to a more specific contexts such as the acceptance levels of different gender from the old and new

generations towards various controversial elements of the controversial skincare or other types of advertisements. By this means, it helps to shed further light on the effects of different generations on their perceptions toward the same type and other types of advertisements.

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