

# “The role of shockvertising in the context of various generations”

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## The role of shockvertising in the context of various generations

### Abstract

Shockvertising is an innovative advertising technique that purposely attempts to gain and keep attention with horror and disgust. This type of advertisement, in which blood, internal organs, racism and sexuality play a central role, can be found in our country, Slovakia as well. In order to obtain accurate and relevant information, current science only deals with the controversial and unethical advertising campaigns of companies. In this paper the values of each generation are presented then the concept of generation marketing is discussed in more details. In this research our goal is to find out how various age groups react to this kind of advertising. It is examined with the focus group technique, and, in order to extract quantitative data, the mentioned technique is combined with a questionnaire. Our assumptions and hypothesis are supported with statistical data, charts and tests of independence.

**Keywords:** shockvertising, shocking adverts, generations, generation marketing.

**JEL Classification:** M31, M37.

### Introduction

Since advertising can be found everywhere and customers are exposed to them in films, on TV as product endorsements and placements, it makes them indifferent to them. In order to attract their attention, shockvertising appeared which has been used by many companies in the world. Advertisers and marketers, when promoting a product, play with emotions by violating norms to grab the attention of its audience to bring awareness to a brand or a public issue. Shocking ads are more likely to be remembered compared to traditional advertisements.

Shockvertising is often applied in various strategies, for example in anti-fur or anti-smoking campaigns. This type of advertising turned out to be effective despite the fact that it has been criticized because of its offensive style. Products or issues that require special attention are more likely to be advertised with negative shock rather than with positive (Uprety, 2013).

Execution strategies that have been gaining attention in the past few years range from emotional to informational. Irritation (Greyser, 1973; Aaker and Bruzzone, 1985), humor (Sterthal and Craig, 1973; Gelb and Zinkhan, 1986), warmth (Aaker et al., 1986), fear (Ray and Wilkie, 1970; La Tour and Zahra, 1988), and sexuality (Bello et al., 1983; Severn et al., 1990) trigger various feelings.

Provocation, which is another form of execution strategy, has been popular recently. Its aim is to shock and gain attention. Provocation as a communication strategy has been used only recently, despite the fact that shocking has always been a strategy in advertising.

The main objective of this research is to define provocation as a form of strategy and to analyze consumers' reactions to various provocative advertising.

The first shock advertisements are connected to United Colors of Benetton. Oliviero Toscani photographer made some controversial advertising campaigns for the company. Benetton, a clothing retailer, which is based in Ponzano Veneto, Italy, is considered to be the pioneer of provocative advertising ("United Colors" publicity campaign). Their graphic ads sometimes contained images unrelated to any actual products being sold by the company.

These images included a variety of shocking subjects, for instance, a deathbed scene of a man dying from AIDS, a bloodied, unwashed newborn baby with umbilical cord still attached, a priest and a nun about to engage in a romantic kiss, three different hearts with "black", "white" and "yellow" written onto them.

Their strategy was adopted by other global brands, like Diesel (it debuted a series of ads for their "Be Stupid" campaign with cynicism in which women and men were in various indecent, unsafe and provocative situations) and Espirit (who raised eyebrows with its advertising "Unless George Bush is Available to Babysit", in which they took a stand on the abortion debate in the USA). Racism, AIDS, war and death appeared in the ads putting aside all ethical norms that were valid in the society. This advertising technique is called "Shockvertising", which is the blend of the expression shocking advertising (Vézina, Paul, 1997).

### 1. Provocation in advertising

Provocation has a close similarity to fear, humor, warmth, irritation, sexuality and nudity, those which can shock many people of various countries and cultures.

The three main elements of provocation are distinctiveness, ambiguity and transgression of norms and taboos.

A definition of provocation in advertising generates reaction, and in this case, it is hoped that reaction will be in the form of some self-questioning, some reappraisal. The content of an advertisement is to shock.

Distinctiveness is associated with the Helson (1964) Adaptation Level Theory which says that based on our experience our perceptions of things, such as waiting time, size or value change. In experiments – testing the theory – distinctiveness has been used with the aspects of size, position, color and movement. The results show that distinctive stimuli have a positive effect on the degree to which attention is attracted and the ad is memorized. (Childers and Houston, 1984).

Ambiguity in advertising tries to raise intrigue, invoke associations – or an advertisement is simply confusing, misspelt, a jumble of bad grammar. Ambiguity can be effective if it captures layers of meanings in a memorable slogan. In the Howard and Sheth (1969) model stimulus ambiguity is defined as “the lack of clarity of the stimulus display in communicating the descriptive and evaluative aspects of the brand, product class and the nature of motives” (Howard and Sheth, 1969, pp. 158-159). According to the results of Zinkhan and Martin (1983), there is a connection between the level of complexity of the message and responses to advertising.

The transgression of norms and taboos has also been investigated by some researchers recently. We can find studies where advertising is described as one of the elements contributing to changed norms (Pollay, 1986). But one fact cannot be ignored, that changed norms have also influenced advertising.

There is a growing number of such advertising in Slovakia, as well, therefore we found it important to assess how society reacts to such advertising. The purpose of our research is to demonstrate statistically if there are any differences between generations in perception of shock advertisements. We are trying to prove or disapprove it with our assumptions and hypotheses. From statistical results we can get an idea which group the campaign should target, where to introduce it, and how much risk we take regarding winning or losing loyalty.

## 2. Demarcation of generations

The irrevocably changed thinking of marketers about customers and the market dates back to 1968, when one day Florence Skelly, sitting in the office of Daniel Yankelovich marketing and research firm, was thinking about a customer’s phone call. Yankelovich was a small consultancy and research firm dealing with the analysis of market and social

trends. They helped companies to assess their clients’ needs. Unusual findings were seen at the end of the sixties, which also gained their clients’ attention. The first manifestations of changed values and the emergence of new market attitudes were seen in this company. Talented young people dropped out of school because they were excited about change. Alternative lifestyles became very popular while interest in bureaucratic careers decreased. New fashion trends, new brands and home furnishings habits appeared. Marketing professionals had to respond to difficult questions: Who are these customers? Is it necessary to deal with them? Is it a permanent change or just a fashion wave? How strong are these new attitudes? Market leader of women’s lingerie, Playtex was analyzed first but everything was all right. Then they started to examine other aspects – generational aspects. At the end of the above mentioned period in America such a generation became adult, which substantially shook the calm market. Professionals had not met such a profound change in consumer behavior before. Yankelovich began to see the problem more clearly and they managed to develop a new method. They realized that there was nothing wrong with the implementation of marketing, but social values changed and for that reason the new generation reacted differently to marketing efforts. The new freedom of young people influenced the buying habits of their parents. Companies had to meet the new needs and styles. This meant that the only possible way to adapt the communication of products and services to the needs of the generations, if we come to know their motivation and the values of the generation (Walker, Clurman, 2003).

From 1971 the above mentioned market research company examined the U.S. consumers’ behavior with a specific method – Yankelovich MONITOR. It was the first and most complete study of the American lifestyle, buying behaviour and their moral values. This method was applied longitudinally from year to year, so they had a more than twenty-five-year old insight into various trends. “CnXn” is one of the unique features of MONITOR, which allows to record thousands of respondents separately. Thus, consumers – already known by researchers – can be asked again. The system monitors the changes in the social environment in terms of the similarities and differences between generations. Five different generations are going to be described in the following part. (The generational theory was created by two U.S. authors William Strauss and Neil Howe.):

- ◆ veterans;
- ◆ baby boomers;
- ◆ generation X;

- ◆ generation Y;
- ◆ generation Z (Science & Nature, online).

Each generation has its typical moral values, which they developed themselves as a result of changes in their social environment. Each generation has a different attitude to family, career, work/life balance, practice and development, loyalty, gender roles and working environment.

After having considered these factors, demographers identified these five generations.

### 3. Generational marketing

*Mature* generation is brand loyal, and Madison Avenue advertising agency did build upon this. All veterans reacted to advertisements, and the most effective slogans strengthened their self-concept, the image of the men of the American dream. Timex Watches in the advertisements – despite the fact that they tested them violently – remained operable, and according to the slogan – “It takes a licking and keeps on ticking.” This represented the indestructibility, the self-concept of mature generation. It is easy to take advantage of the prestige of the brand, but it should not be based solely on this. It is important to respect mature generation, because they feel they deserve it. Mature people gladly spend money on their grandchildren. Taking advantage of this, Grand Travel Agency introduced some trips that were specifically organized for grandparents and their grandchildren (e.g. “African photo safari”, “Patriotic cruise”). But one of the basic characteristics of the cohort is that they are the least likely to be the first to try a new product. It is therefore important for them to be sure that they do not waste their time on experimentations. Companies which consider targeting older generation unnecessary make a mistake. Mature customers will surely be faithful to those who respect their basic values and motivation. (Walker, Clurman, 2003).

*Boomers* are mostly focused on themselves, so it is good if the advertising reinforces their faith in their individual abilities. They expect a series of incredible experiences – a promise in the advertisement of Disney Institute. Their buying habits and consumption are defined by the struggle to avoid disappointment. Larger companies tried to join these topics – novelty, difference and adventure are the new marketing keywords. Later they tried to join the increased interest in social issues as well (the role of women, young people of different nationalities, etc). After 1979 Florence Skelly studied the behavior of boomers. He named their consumption style “Strategic Shopping”, which was the use of full force over the market participation. New methods were developed which proved that they could get

everything what they required (“Buy until you collapse” car stickers). They wanted to obtain the best possible product at the best price – it was the strategic shopping itself. Companies noticed that brand loyalty was disappearing and discount stores were flourishing. Too much work was their main source of stress, and shopping strategy shifted to a new phenomenon – usage of “strategic management”. A boomer adapts the order of importance to the opportunity of his/her life, and provides a great scope for shifting tasks. Boomers expect from advertisements to provide detailed information by which they may come to their reasonable decisions. Compared to other generations, they want to know the most information about the new product. They are often interested in the opinions of people who already have the particular product, and they read comparative analysis about the product as well. The answer to the former demands is the method of “mass customization”, which offers a considerable simplification, but it does not take away control and information from the customer (Walker, Clurman, 2003).

A number of dangers can frighten some people of *generation X*, but there are more of those who notice risk and place it in their lifestyles. Mountain Dew energy drink advertisements made sport of extreme physical adventures, expanded the boundaries of cultural acceptability. They expressed their views on how to understand and dominate life. According to J. Walker and Clurman for this generation variety is the key to life and it is the base of market appearance. They are more challenging for marketers because they are more experienced in the field of advertising, they know marketing and are rather skeptical. They do not like when they are categorized. Mania of generation X for novelty meant oasis for marketers. New styles, colors, flavors, product line extensions appeared. They also had to keep in mind that not quantity but quality was preferred. In their case we have to be careful how to give up hard selling techniques – because they turn away from everything that has “the smell of marketing”. MONITOR survey also revealed that members of generation X are energetic and fun seeking customers. Entertainment is much more valuable for them than for the boomers or the mature generation. We should also calculate on pragmatism they had soon acquired. Their spending is more restrained and predictable. What to sell is not the only challenge but also which method to do it with. Generation X has a different attitude to the latest and traditional advertising media. They can mostly be reached with visual tools. They are the real and almost the first television generation. They got acquainted with the spread of computers and the

Internet, so their reference point and values are determined by seen pictures rather than written words (Walker, Clurman, 2003).

The latest technology is obvious for *generation Y*. They are the most active users of social networking sites – most of the companies have already realized this. They quickly process information. According to Kelly Mooney – based on her research – they are willing to wait three seconds for a webpage to load before moving on. They easily get bored, watch less TV and read fewer books. A kind of change can be observed in media consumption, which is a big challenge for marketing professionals. (Gen Y, 2006, online) Consumers of generation Y prove themselves to be conscious, whose expectations are high. The Internet users' opinion is important for them (community content – user generated content UCG), which is confirmed by a U.S. study that more than 51% of respondents trust more in community content than in information published on the company's website. 84% of customers are influenced by the company's online community content (It was 70% in the Baby Boom generation). 52% of Generation Y say that they would prefer to purchase online and 48% rather prefer stores, but mainly after getting information online. Asking the same from boomers, 71% of them said they would prefer to buy in stores. Consumer feedback thus could be useful for companies to keep an ongoing relationship with customers. Opinions must be placed in center and shared to be accessible. Also in this study, members of generation y were asked also about the products they would never buy without knowing the community content (UCG): 44% – main electronic products, 40% – car, 39% – choosing a hotel, 32% – travel opportunities, 29% – choosing a credit card, 29% – insurance. In order to search for reviews, they are willing to join social networks – three times more than the boomers (22% and 7%) (BazaarVoice). In addition, positive results can be achieved if we focus on the fact that members of generation y should get to know our product personally when events are organized by the company (event marketing). This is supported by the fact that 94% of them are more likely to buy a product they have positive experience with. Furthermore, 75% of them say they prefer to communicate with the company via social networks after an organized event by the company (Connecting with, online).

According to a study, carried out by ESSEC School of Business in 2011, *generation Z* will be the next buyer of branded products, but if companies selling luxury brands do not pay attention to good communication, they will not become committed to

the original products. Luxury Daily claims that this generation requires the value of brands, but if they do not have enough money to buy them, they will simply buy the counterfeit products as well. With a well-planned online marketing, however, manufacturers “could catch” this generation – experts say. Likewise U.S. children, young people in Slovakia between the ages of 8-18 in many cases spend more time in front of screens or on mobiles than with sleeping. Teachers also confirm the fact that today's teenagers' attention is more and more difficult to keep. In our country more than 80% of members of generation Z have internet access, and almost all of them are online at least once a day. It is much more difficult to reach them with traditional television advertising because they usually watch their favorite TV programs and reality shows on their computer, tablet or cell phone (Podľa americkej, online). Any company targeting young generation should be aware of this. Kathy Savitt, manager of Lockerz marketing company focusing on youth, confirms the fact that the youngest generation, instead of waiting for information from the older generation, dictates the trends themselves. Even before finishing the primary school they “start” to behave like this. Silly Bandz rubber bracelets are given as an example by Savitt, which were first worn by nine and ten year-old children, but now they can be seen on the hands of models and older people as well (Nastupuje najbystrejšia, online). Companies must be prepared for the arrival of this group of consumers, and to go beyond traditional methods. Generation Z is much more careful, and thanks to the Internet they are experienced in a lot of things. To capture their fleeting attention could be a really great challenge.

#### 4. Method of the research

To implement this research the analysis of the focus groups turned out to be the most effective method. Various generations were the focus groups, and there were eight people in each group. The creation of groups was necessary because the selected shocking advertisements were shown simultaneously to the members of each generation. The qualitative research was carried out interactively, but each participant was given a form on which their opinions were recorded – thus facilitating the subsequent processing of responses. It was a quantitative questionnaire containing relevant questions that helped with testing of the hypotheses and processing of the responses. The validity and depth of the qualitative research was increased by several methods that revealed the examined phenomenon. We obtained primary, qualitative and quantitative data.

Our study was based on the research conducted by SarraParry and the team focusing on the response to the shock therapy applied in the profit and non-profit sectors. Using shock advertisements is a phenomenon with increasing tendencies, taking into account the final efficiency, which brings their application. Shock advertisements are more frequently observed in the non-profit sector in comparison with the profit sector. The basic research methodology of SarraParry and the team was based on examining:

- ◆ differences in responses to shock advertisements applied in the profit and non-profit sectors;
- ◆ analysis of the cultural characteristics of respondents and their responses to shock advertisements.

The authors applied the method of group discussions (so-called focus groups), the sample consisted of international post-graduate students between the ages of 21 and 35. It is a typical age group that shock advertisers aim to influence (Vezina, Paul, 1997).

In Northwest Wales students were recruited by a researcher who was responsible for controlling the focus group. 12 shocking billboard advertisements were selected. The researchers' aim was also to achieve an equal balance of FP and NFP adver-

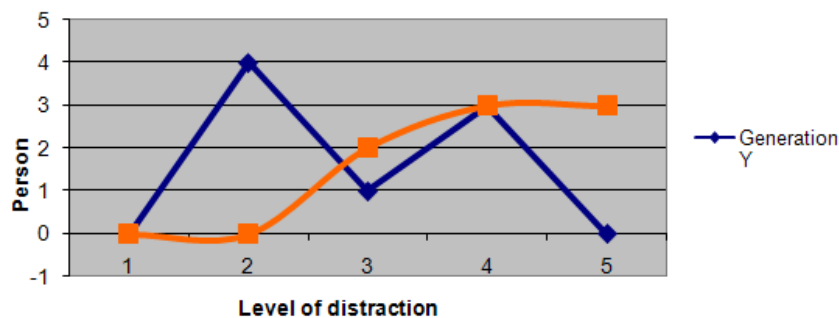
tisements (six from NFP sector and six from the FP sector). The sample was cross-cultural and for that reason some of the advertisements were international. Controversial advertisements were included which had received complaints or had been banned in their country of origin.

The research explored the use of shock advertising in NFPs and FPs from a cultural perspective, which indicates that responses to advertising relieve over time, customers accept social taboos more easily. This research generates new insights into the use of shock advertising. Consumer reactions, shown in SarraParry's study, were influenced by religion and gender. These student participants accepted shock advertising more easily than expected, though.

The research explores attitudes and emotional reactions to extreme marketing communications. Although shock advertising is an effective way of attracting attention, persuasion depends on the sector as well as on the consumer's cultural characteristics.

## 5. Results of the research (Baráth, 2014)

*Hypothesis 1: Generation X finds shock advertisements of the products more controversial than generation Y does (Hiram, Ernest, 2012).*



Sources: Author's own research.

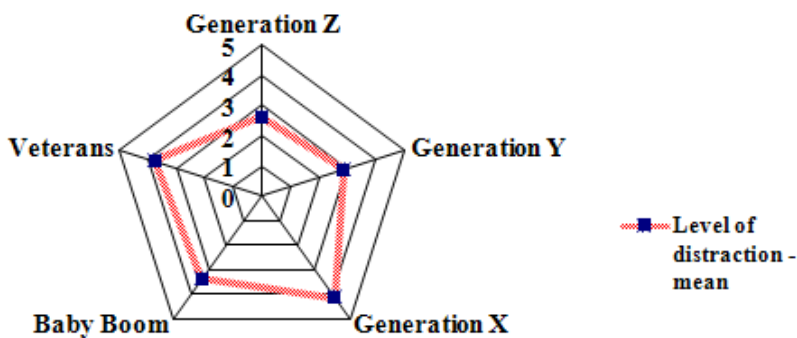
**Fig. 1. Level of distraction caused by the presented advertisements /Likert scale/**

Using the five-point Likert scale we examined the question to what extent the members of the focus group were upset by the sight. In the case of the given hypothesis, we had to compare the responses of generation Y and X. The answers appeared on the following levels: 1 did not upset me at all, 2 slightly upset me, 3 moderately upset me, 4 significantly upset me, 5 completely upset me. The graph shows that generation Y was mainly slightly upset, while generation X was significantly or completely upset by the presented advertisements. For generation X the highest levels of distraction were 4 and 5, whereas for generation Y it was 2. The first hypothesis was confirmed, that generation X finds shock adver-

tisements of products more controversial than generation Y does.

*Hypothesis 2: According to some research, younger generations are much more able to accept shock advertisements – these do not evoke many negative emotions in them (Waller, 2008).*

This hypothesis could be tested best with question 5 of the questionnaire. The results are illustrated on a radar chart. Five generations appear in the five points of the shape in which there is the distraction rate from 1 to 5 on the basis of the Likert scale. An area is outlined by the means and it shows which generations find advertisements the most and the least shocking.



Sources: Author’s own research

Fig. 2. Each generation’s attitude to shock advertisement

When analyzing the radar chart we have to take into account the fact that the generation closest to the highlighted area considers advertisements the most shocking. We assumed that the distraction level will not rise properly as the generations are moving forward, but the chart clearly shows that on the whole the two younger generations’ level of distraction is lower than the three older generations’ level. Thus we can say that the second hypothesis was proved.

*Hypothesis 3: According to a British survey, the most common topics of shocking advertisements – which upset children – are sexuality and nudity (which baffle them). The presence of violence and fear is the second most upsetting phenomenon in advertisements (Ipsos Mori, 2012).*

In accordance with the hypothesis, the most common factors, which upset children, are sexuality and nudity. Since this kind of sexual advertisement had not been included in our research, we examined the subsequent themes – violence and fear.

Table 1. Motives which upset some members of generation Z

Generation Z: Please explain, which motives triggered this feeling?
Advertisements with the bear and the car were frightening.
It is frightening but also interesting.
It warns us that this can happen to us as well.
(no answer, because the advertisements did not upset the person)
Some of them are a bit rude.
Fearful, but the one with the angel and the devil is very creative.
They are trying to force them on people.
Food for thought.

Sources: Author’s own research.

Five times out of 8 cases we found responses where references to violence and fear appeared. In default of sexual advertisements the hypothesis can not be accepted nor rejected unambiguously. All we can state is that the second most common factors – violence and fear – can be found in really outstanding places in our research as well.

Since with the combination of the interview and the questionnaire of the focus groups we obtained some relevant information, thus we assigned a reason to carry out some independent tests using excel program: *is the level of distraction caused by shock advertisements related to the ability of developing brand loyalty?*

The horizontal lines of the cross table display the Likert scale representing distraction, the vertical columns of the table show the willingness of loyalty (yes, no).

Table 2. Cross table 1

Satisfaction	Willingness of loyalty		Total
	Yes	No	
Did not upset me at all	2	2	4
Slightly upset me	4	3	7
Moderately upset me	6	3	9
Significantly upset me	8	6	14
Completely upset me	4	2	6
Total	24	16	40

Sources: Author’s own research.

First we had to propose two hypotheses. On the basis of hypothesis H0 the two criteria are unrelated, and on the basis of hypothesis H1 there is interdependence. Step by step we defined the value of X2, which is 0.516.

Hypothesis	H <sub>0</sub> :	P <sub>ij</sub>	=	unrelated
	H <sub>1</sub> :	P <sub>ij</sub>	=	dependent

Expected frequencies in the case of existence of H0:

Table 3. Independence test 1

Satisfaction	Willingness of loyalty		Total
	Yes	No	
Did not upset me at all	2	2	4
Slightly upset me	4	3	7
Moderately upset me	5	4	9
Significantly upset me	8	6	14
Completely upset me	4	2	6
Total	24	16	40

Table 3 (cont.). Independence test 1

E		K
	$C_r$	
0.516	9.49	

Sources: Author’s own research.

“n” stands for the sample size, “r” is the number of rows and “c” is the number of columns in the cross table, “v” stands for the degree of freedom, which, by using a formula, was calculated by rows and columns. The  $X^2$  critical value, using a function and with the fourth degree of freedom, has a value of 9.49. Because the defined value of 0.516 is less than 9.49, it does not belong to the critical range. It means that on the significance level of 5% hypothesis H0 is true, the counter hypothesis is false. Thus, the answer is that product loyalty is not related to the distraction level of shock advertisements. Therefore, companies using shock advertisements do not need to worry about losing their loyal customers because of controversial advertisements. It is of course questionable whether this kind of advertisement influences the first purchase. But if the person has already purchased and is satisfied, the controversial advertisement will not influence his/her loyalty. *The question is whether the impacts of traditional advertisements on a person are related to the fact that the person deliberately switches TV channels when a shock advertisement appears.*

Table 4. Cross table 2

Effects of traditional advertisements	Intention to switch TV channels in case of shock advertisements		Total
	Yes	No	
Interested	5	17	22
No impact	3	7	10
Annoying	7	1	8
Total	15	25	40

Sources: Author’s own research.

The effects of traditional advertisements can be found in the three lines of the cross table, and intention to switch TV channels in case of shock advertisements can be seen in the two columns. We proposed the two hypotheses again: H0 and H1, then we determined the estimated frequency if H0 is valid. We defined X2, which took up the value of 10.822. Using INVERZ.KHI function on the significance level of 5% and with the second degree of freedom we defined also the critical value of  $X^2$  that is 5.99.

Table 5. Independence test 2

E		K
	$C_r$	
	5,99	10,822

Sources: Author’s own research.

Since the value of 10.822 belongs to the critical range, we can say that the two factors are related. So it does matter what a person thinks about advertisements in general, if we wanted to find out whether an intention to avoid shock advertisements may occur in the future. Therefore somebody who substantially gets annoyed with traditional advertisements will more likely switch channels when a shock advertisement appears – it can hardly be expected that the person’s curiosity will make him/her to watch the shock advertisement.

**Summary and the future of shockvertising**

The examination of our assumptions and hypotheses proved that the majority of veterans could quickly become loyal to a product with less controversial advertisements. The majority of baby boomers were able to obtain enough information from shock advertisements. Generation X is able to avoid shock advertisements and to take no notice of them. Generation Y finds most of the shock advertisements on the Internet, and they find the presented advertisements much less controversial than members of generation X do. The two young generations’ level of distraction is lower than the three older generations’ level – demonstrated on the radar chart. Since sexual advertisements were not presented in our research, we could neither accept nor refuse our third hypothesis. We simply stated that violence and fear are the second most common upsetting factors among the members of generation Z. These two factors appeared on an outstanding place in our research results as well.

According to Theodore Levitt (1970) advertising was not solely a business tool, but also an artistic means of expression. Despite the apparent immunity of today’s youth to shock tactics, advertisers will constantly have to make use of changing elements in order to ensure the success of their campaigns. It is through this constant interactivity between consumer and advertiser that one will be able to evaluate which strategies are successful and which ones are not. Advertisers must keep in mind not to overuse certain concepts or strategies as the effect or popularity can easily wear off and eventually turn to dislike with the consumer (Uprety, 2013).

While shock advertisements create awareness about the brands they promote, their long-term effectiveness is not known. To what extent brand awareness is increased, it influences recall, attitudes, purchases intentions, and brand image needs to be empirically investigated. Similarly, future studies should explore whether shock advertisements change consumers’ perceptions of the advertising institution or motivate certain consumer segments, to demand similar performances from other advertisers.



Given the increasing popularity of notions such as “corporate citizenship” (Maignan and Ferrell, 2001) or “citizen brands” (Willmott, 2001), it is hoped that the present paper generates future inquiries into the potential of shock advertising both as a marketing instrument and a vehicle of public communication (Sandikci, 2001). The concept of shockvertising can be a silver bullet if it is used properly. However, marketers must be

careful since shocking and offending someone are separated with a thin line. That is why its future lies in its use. If it is used intelligently, it can strengthen a brand, but if it is used ineffectively, it can damage it for a long time. Elements of advertisements have to be changed to have successful campaigns. Marketers must be innovative, and consumers with their wishes and needs should be elemental.

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