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Controversy Advertising: an Exploratory Study on Controversy Advertising and its Effects

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Controversy Advertising: An Exploratory Study on Controversy
Advertising and Its Effects

by
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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial
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Abstract

This is an exploratory study on the effects controversial social issues in advertising has on consumers. As the current political climate becomes more and more charged, corporations are joining in on the conversation, producing advertising categorized as “controversy advertising”. However, controversy advertising hasn’t been deeply explored, and its effectiveness and goal is unclear. Data for this research is gathered through secondary and primary research, including a literature review, an interview, and a survey where respondents were asked to react to two controversy advertisements. Between secondary and primary research, this study examines how controversy advertising impacts the way people view the advertiser and the social issue presented in the advertisement.

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1.0 Introduction

There has been a recent increase in the presence of controversial issues in corporate advertising, and it has sparked a debate. Advertisements like the infamous Pepsi-Jenner advertisement push people to believe corporations are manipulative and commodify serious societal problems. On the other hand, The Wells Fargo advertisement featuring a lesbian couple warms consumers' hearts and sheds a positive light on Wells Fargo as a brand. To add to the debate, corporations claim to truly care, but when profit is the number one responsibility of a corporation, it is difficult to decipher their genuine intentions. This is a subject that impacts many parties, including the corporation, consumers, and the groups who are represented in these controversial advertisements. That is why it is important to study the effect controversial issues in advertisements has on society.

1.1 Research Question

With the prevalence of controversy advertising in modern society, this study will be addressing the question:

How does the presence of controversial issues in advertisements affect consumers' perception of the controversial issue and the brand?

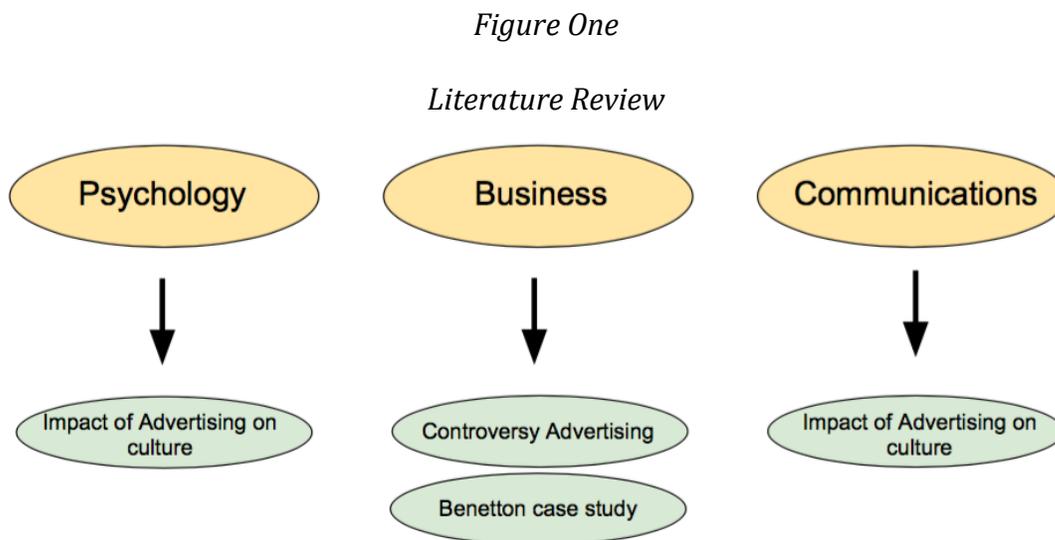
1.2 Thesis Structure

These are the steps that are taken to conduct this study. Chapter Two is a detailed literature review that brings business, communications, sociology, and psychology studies together. The specific term "controversy advertising" will be

defined, along with examples and its history. Advertising's sociological and psychological effects will then be studied. These literatures inform Chapter Three, where the methodology of data collection is discussed. Chapter Four goes through the results of the data and insights that can be drawn from them. Chapter Five brings together the insights with the secondary research to initiate discussion for future studies.

2.0 Literature Review

To understand how controversy advertising's affects, background research and secondary research must first be conducted (Figure One). Controversy advertising and its background will be defined through business literature. Then, psychology and communications literature will be studied to understand the part advertising plays in society, and how it can influence culture and individuals. Business literature will be looked at again to conduct a brief case study on the Benetton campaign, a pioneer of controversy advertising. This analysis will inform and guide the primary research that follows.



2.1- Defining Controversy Advertising

Controversy advertising is a branch of advertising that wasn't officially acknowledged until the 1970s (International Advertising Association, 1977). There

are many other similar branches of advertising that it could be mistaken for. Social marketing, for example, could easily be mistaken as controversy advertising, but it is the application of marketing to the solution of social and health problems, such as smoking or jaywalking (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971). While there is no debate that smoking and jaywalking are unhealthy and unsafe, controversy advertising, as its name suggests, deals with controversial issues that have multiple facets. Another similar term is advocacy advertising, where a problem is presented and a solution is offered (Tinic, 1997). Controversy advertising, on the other hand, works to present an issue, but there is no call to action.

Unlike its similar counterparts, there are few studies of controversy advertising that currently exist. The largest and most extensive research was conducted by the International Advertising Association (IAA), who published *Controversy Advertising: How Advertisers present Points of View in Public Affairs*. Since there hadn't been any research conducted on controversy advertising before, the International Advertising Association felt it necessary to gain more understanding about it as it grew in popularity. When the study was first being developed, there was debate on the terminology. Some alternative terms suggested included "public-interest advertising", "strategic advertising", "opinion advertising", etc. In the end, "controversy" was determined as the best term, since it, "implies a range of levels of activity from passive to opposition to discussion and even dispute. It suggests a question at issue, but does not limit the number of points of view as would dialogue" (IAA, 1977).

The official definition of controversy advertising according to the International Advertising Association is as followed:

Any kind of paid public communication or message, from an identified source and in a conventional medium of public advertising, which presents information or a point of view bearing on a publicly recognized controversial issue”(IAA, 1977).

For this study, there is another aspect to the definition that must be added, and that is the advertisement must be paid for by a corporation.

To determine the goals and intentions of controversy advertising, its origins should be considered. Some form of controversy advertising has always been used by governments and social groups, but the controversy advertising defined in this study had a sharp increase around 1973 (IAA, 1977). According to the IAA’s research, this sudden increase was not a result of corporations’ efforts, but rather the result of a generation of politically committed and experimental advertisers. During a time of economic expansion, corporations and businesses had the chance to experiment and create new and innovative ideas. Perhaps one of the most famous and widespread pioneers of controversy advertising was Benetton, an Italian clothing company and their United Colors of Benetton campaign. When the main goal of a corporation is to generate profit, it’s difficult to measure the sincerity of its controversy advertising. However, the IAA explains that there’s no doubt the advertisers believe they are positively contributing to the public through their advertisements.

This study of controversy advertising done by the International Advertising Association worked to curate controversy advertising campaigns from all around the world to determine its scope, trends, expenditures, and people involved. However, there has yet to be studies done on the consumer's side to determine whether the conclusions that the IAA draws through their study are accurate. Nor do they study whether controversy advertising actually works to benefit the controversial issue. Through this study, the consumer's perspective on controversy advertising will be explored.

2.2 Advertising's Impact on Culture and Values

Advertisers consider themselves to be going good through advertising, but is it possible for corporate advertising to deeply impact society and culture? While there is limited studies on controversy advertising available, many psychological and communications studies have been done on advertising's impact on society. The debate of advertising's effect, particularly on individuals is common largely because of the amount of parties it affects; for example, advertisers would want to know if the money they're spending on advertising is effective (Dyer, 1988).

While advertising has been around since human existence, the effect of it on society wasn't considered until the 1930s, when the literary critic F. R. Leavis (1933) accused advertising of "evoking cheap, almost mechanical emotional responses". He believed that advertising was inherently evil; this idea was further supported by the Frankfurt School, a group of writers and academics. They concluded that although advertising increases material standards, it also increases

social and political apathy (Dyer, 1988). They believed that advertising is a way of controlling the public. This sparked the debate of whether advertising acts as a reflection of societal values, or a driver of it.

Paralleling with Leavis and the Frankfurt School, recent psychological studies are finding that effective advertising affects people on a psychological level, thus giving it power to potentially alter the way people view the world. In the study *Think of Me as Evil? (2011)*, the authors indicated that with the increased pervasiveness of advertising, it has become an important factor in normalizing behaviors, attitudes, and values. For example, women in mainstream media are depicted as thin, thus creating a standard that society depicts as “beautiful”. This particular view has been so deeply ingrained into society that mental and eating disorders have resulted from it. This take is based off the idea that consumers are passive decision makers, and advertising drives their decision.

If this is the case, then normalization can also bring about social advancements. More gay representation has recently been shown in corporate commercials, creating an environment where gay is normal. However, the situation is more complex than that. There has been a significant increase in gay rights activism in the past ten years that has also brought about the normalization of gay marriage. Thus, it can't be said that corporate advertising is the sole reason for this change.

Leavis, the Frankfurt School, and the authors of *Think of Me as Evil?* all believe consumers are passive agents in the face of advertising and that advertising is a driver of culture. Stephen Fox, author of *The Mirror Makers: A History of*

American Advertising and its Creators (1997), contradicts their view. He believes that, “to stay effective advertising couldn’t depart too far from established public tastes and habits”. After all, people remember and connect emotionally to situations and products they can relate to. In his view, advertising is a reflection of social values.

Dyer also believes people are not passive, and are in fact actively using advertisements based on their circumstances. This is because the way people perceive an advertisement changes based on their social class, family relationships, etc (Dyer, 1988). In other words, “The media’s effects can be thought of as being dependent on the functions that they perform for individual audience members”(Dyer 1988). Taking the subject of gay rights for example, it is unlikely people will change their perception of it through overexposure to pro-gay advertisements. Their view of it is something that is also affected through their religious views and their social circle.

Whether the advertiser or the consumer is in control still remains unclear. If advertising is a reflection of culture, then it would be difficult for it to actually create social change through controversy advertising. On the other hand, if it is a driver of culture, then it’s possible that effective controversy advertising can change societal values. This exploration of who is in control will be briefly investigated in this study.

2.3 United Colors of Benetton

As mentioned earlier, Benetton was one of the pioneers of controversy advertising. In order to understand controversy advertising’s impact on society, it is

beneficial to look at the effects of this famous campaign, how the public reacted to it, and what succeeded and fail.

Benetton is a clothing brand founded in 1965. In 1984, as an effort to rebrand the company, Benetton hired award-winning photographer Oliviero Toscani to head their new advertising campaign. Early on in the campaign, he worked to connect Benetton's colorful clothes to their diverse customer base all around the world, with pictures of culturally diverse people innocently playing together (Figure One). During an extremely racially charged point in history, Benetton believed they stood for multi-culturalism, world peace, racial harmony, and a progressive approach towards serious social issues and colorful sportswear (Benetton Group S.P.A., 1992).

Figure Two

United Colors of Benetton



(Ring of Color)

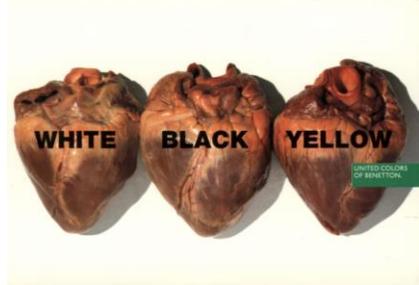
Although Benetton aimed to depict a positive image, a critical eye paints a different picture. Giroux explains that, "The exaggerated precision of the models and primary colors used in the advertisements renders racial unity as a purely aesthetic category while eliminating racial conflict completely in this two-dimensional world of make believe." Black and Quaade (1993) critique the campaign as reducing human differences to a set of simplified caricatures presented as archetypes.

Benetton's depiction of unity was more idealistic than realistic, thus commodifying this controversial social issue. As the International Advertising Association specified in their study, this is one of the risks of controversy advertising, a mistake that is still often made today, an example being the recent Pepsi-Jenner advertisement where Pepsi was perceived as commodifying police brutality.

After this first attempt at rebranding, Toscani realized he missed the mark and needed to shift their strategy. Thus, in 1991, Benetton's products were completely removed from their advertising, and instead were replaced by provocative and compelling images (Figure Three). This shift from portraying idealistic images to portraying reality reflects Benetton's shift from selling products to selling a socially responsible image. As expected, these controversial images sparked a worldwide debate. They were even banned in certain countries. Some, like Black and Quade, condemned Benetton for using serious issues to sell their brand. On the other hand, people like Barela believe that Benetton has shown people they're not alone, and that their struggles are being acknowledged (Barela, 2003).

Figure Three

Benetton's new marketing strategy



(Alternative Marketing Stories)

Despite their success, Benetton had to continue addressing critics and defending their advertising approach. Their response always revolved around a similar theme, “Benetton is not about selling sweaters but about social responsibility, and it is a company that represents less a product than a lifestyle and worldview”(Giroux, 1993). Not only did Benetton succeed in increasing international sales and recognition, they also succeeded in increasing conversation and awareness of the social issues featured.

Many other corporations are following in Benetton’s footsteps of, “representing a worldview”. Yet, there have been few studies on how consumers feel about it. In a study on shock advertising and its effect on consumers, Parry *et al.* (2013) found that Benetton’s advertisements did spark debate and awareness amongst study participants. Creating awareness is one thing, but changing people’s opinions about these controversial issues is another. Jones’ study, although it indicates some interesting findings, remains inconclusive, likely due to the fact that advertising’s effects and social change are such complex issue.

3.0 Methodology

In order to answer the question of whether or not controversy advertising is effective in creating social change, the objectives of this study are:

- Develop insights on how consumers perceive controversy advertising
- Observe for patterns in the data to determine topics for future studies

3.1 Research Design

Advertising's effect is a complex issue, and its multiple facets makes it a difficult subject to test scientifically. Social scientists have come up with a few ways to approach it (Dyer, 1988). One way is to, "examine the influence of ads on the individual and look for evidence of the ability of the advertising media to shape and sometimes change a person's behavior, opinions, and attitudes"(Dyer, 1988). The other option is to, "consider the effects of advertising on the society as a whole and the extent to which consumer advertising promotes general ideas and beliefs"(Dyer, 1988). Studies such as the IAA's study on Controversial Advertising and the Benetton literature largely utilize the second approach. Therefore, this study will employ the first approach in an exploratory context: focusing on how an advertisement changes consumers' attitudes and opinions. In terms of the type of effects research, an operational study will be employed, which is a study of effects as indicators of marketing decision; for example, attitude surveys (Dyer, 1988).

The goal of an exploratory study is not to offer a conclusive answer, but rather to develop a better understanding of the problem and to fuel and guide

conclusive research in the future (Dudovskiy, 2018). Aside from being able to guide future research, another advantage of exploratory studies is that it is flexible and adaptable (Dudovskiy, 2018). Given the limited knowledge of controversy advertising currently available, an exploratory approach is suitable for this study.

However, exploratory studies have limits as well. With a modest sample size, the results of the study may not be generalized to a wider population; furthermore, as most exploratory studies are qualitative, they tend to be subject to some bias (Dudovskiy, 2018). These are all factors to consider throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Parry *et al.* (2013) conducted a similar study on shock advertising, where consumers' reactions to different shock advertisements were studied. Shock advertising, although considered its own branch, is often overlapped with controversy advertising; it is defined as, "an attempt to surprise an audience by deliberately violating norms for societal values and personal ideals to capture the attention of a target audience" (Dahl *et al.*, 2003). This kind of advertising typically works to stimulate fear in audiences as an emotional response since it is commonly used for no smoking and safe driving campaigns (Hastings *et al.* 2004). In many cases, such as Benetton, shock advertising is often utilized as a form of controversy advertising. Due to the similarities between these two branches of advertising, Parry *et al.*'s study will inspire and inform parts of this study's methodology, including the secondary research, and data collection and analysis approaches.

3.2 Data Collection

Chapter Two focused on the secondary research conducted, including literature about controversy advertising from the advertiser's perspective. Information was also gathered on how advertising can affect culture and individuals. The following will outline how the primary research was executed.

3.2.1 Primary Research- Expert Interview

An important part of exploratory research is considering viewpoints from different perspectives. As this study will be focusing on the consumer's perspective, it is also important to understand the advertiser's. Thus, an interview was conducted with Doug Lowell, an advertising professor at Portland State University with 27 years of industry experience, including owning his own agency, Paris France. Interviews are effective in exploring views, experiences, and beliefs of an individual, and provides a deeper understanding than what quantitative information can tell (Gill 2008). The interview was conducted as a semi-structured interview, where a few key questions were defined, but the interviewee is free to diverge and pursue a topic in more detail (Gill 2008).

During the interview (Appendix A), Lowell discussed the importance of "cultural permission". A corporation needs to have cultural permission from consumers before they can appear as genuine in supporting a controversial cause. However, the difficult part, Lowell indicates, is that gauging cultural permission isn't about science, it's about art and sensitivity. With cultural permission being so difficult to gauge, that is why advertising agencies are necessary. IKEA was the first

corporation to feature a gay couple on a TV advertisement, and it was received brilliantly. On the other hand, when the Pepsi-Jenner advertisement aired, it was met with anger and backlash. Lowell points out the key difference between these two advertisements: IKEA had an advertising agency, and Pepsi did not.

Lowell provides interesting insight from the aspect of an advertiser who has worked with many brands and created successful campaigns. The art and sensitive nature of advertising further complicates the controversy advertising debate.

3.2.2 Primary Research- Questionnaire

After approaching controversy advertising from the view of an advertiser, the ultimate goal of this study is on how consumers perceive controversy advertising. As a study on perspectives and attitudes, the focus of data collection will be qualitative data. However, a mixed methods procedure will be utilized, as it allows qualitative data to be quantified; this allows a side-by-side analysis to be done where the qualitative data will be analyzed next to the quantitative, providing potentially valuable insights (Creswell, 2014).

Although questionnaires/surveys are most commonly used to obtain quantitative data, due to the time and financial constraints of this study, it was determined as the most appropriate approach. The questionnaire is a commonly utilized technique since it is efficient for gathering responses from a large sample size, and allows the researcher to compare answers (Saunders et al., 2009). One-on-one interviews could've also been effective, as they are the most common method of gathering perceptions, attitudes, and personal views (Saunders et al., 2009). However, the participant may feel pressured to answer the questions a

certain way with an interviewer next to them as opposed to being in the comforts of their home taking a survey. All respondents were guaranteed anonymity.

Dillman (2000) and Vaus (2014) both mention that surveys should be short, avoid bias, and avoid complicated wording. Thus, a pre-test was conducted to ensure all these points were met; the pre-test was taken by non-business administration Portland State University students, and their answers were not included in the data analysis.

In order to understand how controversy advertising impacts consumers' views on the social issue and the brand, participants were asked to react to two advertisements by different brands and featuring different controversial issues. This was done to avoid bias on the specific issue or brand. The advertisements were chosen through the following criteria:

1. The use of the product advertised should not directly relate to the controversial topic
2. There should be a controversial issue in the advertisement
3. It was aired in the past five years
4. The advertisement must come from a corporation

The following are the advertisements the participants reacted to:

Absolut Vodka- Darla

This advertisement, aired in 2016, is part of their #Absolutnights campaign. It tells the story of a man that meets his childhood friend, previously known as "Dave". However, when they meet this time, his friend now goes by "Darla". At first

he is confused, but after partying together throughout the night and drinking Absolut Vodka, the narrator realizes that it's not Darla who has changed, but himself. This commercial series features various underrepresented groups.

Coca-Cola- Together is Beautiful

This was first aired during the Superbowl in 2014. America the Beautiful is sung in multiple different languages throughout the commercial, thus indicating America is made of diversity and that's what makes it beautiful. When Trump signed the immigration ban in 2017, Coca Cola aired this commercial again

The survey is set up in four parts (See appendix B for full questionnaire):

1. Background questions
2. Coca-Cola questions
3. Absolut Vodka questions
4. Final reflection question

There is a mix of close and open-ended questions present throughout the survey. Don Dillman writes in his guide to mail and Internet surveys (2000) that one of the questions to keep in mind when constructing the survey is whether or not participants will have a ready-made answer in their head. This can influence the accuracy of the answers received. As a survey about participants' personal views on social issues, it is likely they already have their views on the topics. To further simplify the survey, close-ended ordered response style questions were used where

appropriate. For this style of question, too many options is confusing, and too little options can limit the survey results (Dillman, 2000). Therefore, the number of options for each question was carefully selected as deemed appropriate.

A major factor of this study includes participant's political views and past life experiences; therefore, an internet-mediated questionnaire was utilized to obtain participants from throughout the United States, thus ensuring a variety of backgrounds. Amazon Mechanical Turk was chosen as the channel of distribution; it offers access to a virtual community of Workers that assist in completing various tasks, such as completing tasks (Amazon Mechanical Turk). Amazon Mechanical Turk allows the researcher full control over the demographics that can take the survey. For the purposes of this study, all participants had to be located in the United States since it is examining consumers in the US political climate and US market.

Exploratory studies typically feature small sample sizes (Dudovskiy, 2018), thus, this study aimed for at least 100 participants, with an actual total of 107 participants. Out of the respondents, there were a total of 54 males, 52 females, and 1 gender neutral participant. For a survey that was sent to a random sample population, this is a very balanced distribution, although more gender-neutral individuals would have been better. 54 respondents identified themselves to be more liberal, 34 conservative, and 19 neutral. In regards to political parties, there were 44 Democrats, 24 Republicans, 37 Independents, and 1 other. (Appendix C)

4.0 Analysis

Prior to watching the advertisements, participants were asked about their familiarity with the company and the social issue. After watching each advertisement, respondents were asked the following open-ended questions:

“Does this advertisement influence the way you think about [social issue], or how you personally view it? Explain.”

“Does this advertisement change your perception of [brand]? Will it affect your buying of the product?”

The replies to these open-ended questions were analyzed through post-coding, the process of giving numbers to a category, and each answer belongs in one of those categories (Vaus). The categories were created based on the answers given, and were coded manually. The Coca Cola and Absolut questions will first be analyzed separately, then they will be compared. To determine the significance of the comparisons, the chi-square test is employed, a test that determines whether a relationship between two categorical variables in a sample is likely to reflect a real association between these two variable in the population, otherwise known as the p-value (Data Analysis - Chi-Squared Test For Nominal (Categorical) Data). A higher p-value indicates lower statistical significance, whereas a lower p-value indicates higher statistical significance.

4.1 Coca-Cola Questions

Since the Coca-Cola advertisement had immigration as its central controversial issue, it was important to ask how familiar participants are with the conversation surrounding immigration. The majority of participants (93%) are at least somewhat familiar with the conversation surrounding immigration, with a third being very familiar. On a scale from “looser immigration laws” to “stricter immigration laws”, the distribution of responses were almost even, with 40% leaning towards stricter immigration laws, 36.4% towards looser immigration laws, and the rest being neutral.

According to the results (Figure Four), Coca-Cola's *Better Together* advertisement impacted the opinions of 18 participants (17%) to be more positive towards immigration. Meanwhile, 22 participants (21%) were not impacted by this commercial since their views already aligned with the message. Half of participants responded that they were not impacted by this advertisement in general.

Although half of participants stated their opinion about immigration didn't change, nearly 43 participants (40%) responded that their opinion towards Coca Cola was positively impacted. In fact, there were more people who were positively impacted than people who weren't impacted at all (40 and 37 participants respectively, 37% and 35%). On the other hand, 19 participants (18%) found their opinion towards Coca Cola negatively impacted by this commercial, but instead of it being a result of the actual message, the majority were negatively impacted because they disliked Coca Cola's attempt to “manipulate” them.

Figure 4

Q8: Does this advertisement influence how you think about the issue of immigration?

Q9: Does this advertisement influence your perception of Coca Cola?

Code	(Q8) Opinion on Immigration	(Q9) Opinion on Coca Cola
Wasn't affected	71% 76	35% 37
Positively affected	17% 18	37% 40
Negatively affected	6% 6	18% 19
P-Value	P<.0000	.0092

4.2 Absolut Vodka Questions (Figure Five)

Absolut and Coca Cola create products for two different purposes, thus, the questions that were asked were slightly different. The majority of participants (59 participants, 55%) never use Absolut products, but it can't be concluded that they don't recognize the brand, as in many of their responses they mention Absolut as being a vodka product. The social issue featured was transgender rights, which, unlike immigration, has only recently been gaining traction. 95 respondents (89%) were at least somewhat familiar with the subject, and a third of those consider themselves very familiar. When asked where participants stand on the subject of transgender rights, there was almost double as much women who supported it than men.

17 participants (16%) stated that their perception of transgender rights was positively impacted by this advertisement, while 60 (56%) weren't impacted at all, and 22 (21%) were not impacted because their viewpoints already aligned with the social message. Similar to Coca Cola, there were a few participants (2, 2%) whose opinions were affected in a negative way.

When it comes to the perception of the Absolut brand, 25 participants (23%) found themselves impacted positively. In fact, people stated that although they still wouldn't use Absolut's products, they perceived Absolut as a good brand.

“Yes it does actually, they took a great risk and made this advert. Although I don't drink vodka I kind of want to now, just Absolut though.”

“Yes it did. I had no idea they had done an ad like this. I'm not a big drinker, but if I ever need to pick up Vodka, I would probably choose Absolut.”

On the other hand, 50 participants (47%) stated that their perception of Absolut was not shifted by this advertisement, which is a much higher number than the 37 (35%) for Coca Cola.

Figure Five

Q14: Does this advertisement influence how you think about transgender rights or how you personally view transgender people?

Q15: Does this advertisement influence your perception of Absolut Vodka? Will it affect your buying of their product?

Code	(Q14) Opinion on Transgender Rights	(Q15) Opinion on Absolut
Wasn't affected	76% 81	47% 50
Positively affected	16% 17	23% 25
Negatively affected	2% 2	10% 11
P-Value	P<.0000	.0002

4.3 Key Insights - Bringing Coca Cola and Absolut Vodka Together

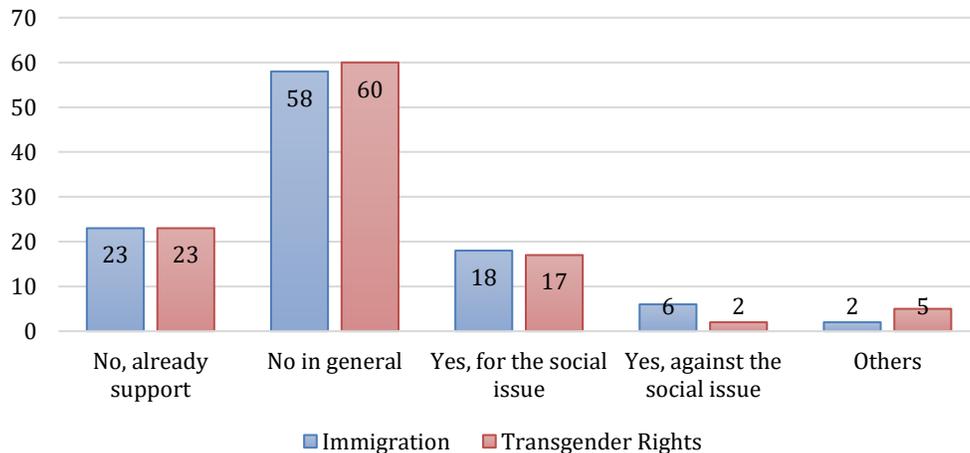
Now that responses for each advertisement have been studied, their results will be compared, bringing out some interesting observations and insights.

4.3.1 Insight One

The first observation is that the responses are practically the same for both advertisements when asked if opinions towards the social issue were impacted (Figure Six). The p-values for each response category were under .009. With a low p-value, it can be interpreted that this similarity is statistically significant. This indicates that perhaps regardless of the social issue featured, their reaction towards it would be the same.

Figure Six

Did this advertisement make you re-think the subject of immigration/transgender rights?



4.3.2 Insight Two

It could then be hypothesized that their opinions towards the brand would yield the same results. However, that is not so, as can be seen by this next observation. After watching the advertisements, there was almost double the amount of people who thought positively of Coca Cola than of Absolut. This comparison yielded a p-value of .029, indicating that this difference is statistically significant. Coca Cola had responses such as:

“Yes. [This advertisement] makes me think that their stated values are more than a corporate line and that they are indeed committed to diversity and inclusion.”

“Yes. There are a lot of brands that won't take a side on a particular issue. Especially a topic such as immigration. I think it was brave that Coca Cola did this commercial.”

On the other hand, people had the following comments about Absolut's advertisement:

“I felt like the ad was slightly forced - I like what they are supporting and will buy their products, but I don't think this is the most effective way to support transgender rights because it highlights someone's initial disgust with a transgender - this could be harmful if taken the wrong way.”

“I don't buy Absolut products, and I won't buy them after this ad. This ad makes it look like the solution to acceptance and getting rid of judgments is to get drunk all night. Of course everything will look better to you, drink after drink.”

With Absolut, participants became much more focused on the way the product interacts with the social issue as compared to Coca Cola. John O'Toole, a long-time spokesperson for the advertising industry and a long time advertising executive, indicated the importance of “preparing” the audience for the message, because, “when a company that has never established its identity with the viewer is suddenly confronting them about an important and controversial issue, it leaves the viewer in dismay”(IAA, 1977). Many of the survey participants knew Absolut as a vodka company rather than a supporter of diversity and inclusivity, thus, as O'Toole anticipated, Absolut's message was lost. This was the same mistake that Benetton initially made. Because they were only known as a clothing company, their message of peace and unity was lost and instead interpreted as commodifying a serious issue.

4.3.3 Insight Three *(Figure Seven)*

The third observation from the survey is that for both Coca Cola and Absolut, the advertisements changed participants' perception of the brand more than the social issue. Looking at the “no change in opinion” responses, there is a 36%

difference for Coca Cola between opinions about the social issue versus the brand, and a 31% different for Absolut.

Figure Seven

Did the advertisements change people's perceptions of the following?

	Immigration and Coca Cola		Absolut and Transgender Rights	
	Immigration	Coca Cola	Transgender Rights	Absolut
No change in opinion	71% 81	36% 38	78% 83	47% 50
P-Value	.00029		.0026	

4.3.4 Insight Four

Lastly, the fourth observation was that most of the people who were impacted to view the brand more positively already supported the social issue (96 respondents, 90%). A p-value of .00032 indicated that this was a significant finding. This parallels the research in *Think of Me Evil?* (2011) which indicates that advertising is likely to strengthen the values to which it appeals. It further parallels the International Advertising Association's theory that a lot of controversy advertising is appealing to audiences who already support or are sympathetic to the advertisers and their point of view. Although companies prefer to believe they are expanding to new markets, the survey results suggest otherwise.

In short, the four key observations from the survey are:

1. Both advertisements had the same effect on perceptions of the social issues.
2. Participants had a more positive perception of Coca Cola than Absolut.

3. Perception towards the brand was impacted more than perception of the social issue.
4. Most people who were impacted to view the brand more positively already supported the social issue.

5.0 Conclusion and Next Steps

The objective of this study was to understand how controversy advertising affects consumers' perceptions of both the brand and the social issue. From the psychology and communications literature studied, it was clear that there is a debate on whether advertising is a "driver" or "mirror" of change (Alexander 2011). In the case of controversy advertising, the data suggests controversy advertising acts as a mirror, something that reflects people's already-existing values. As the International Advertising Association (1977) mentions, controversy advertising appeals to people who already sympathize with the cause; therefore, it reflects their political and social views. If the nature of controversy advertising is a mirror, then it is possibly ineffective for corporations to use controversy advertising to try and change people's political and social viewpoints.

If brands can't drive social change through controversy advertising, perhaps controversy advertising shouldn't be seen as a tool to drive change, but rather to support change. It can work to reinforce existing beliefs. However, it is essential for corporations to be perceived as genuine, otherwise it can work to push supportive consumers to no longer support the brand. As The IAA (1977) and Lowell both indicate, brands need to have established themselves as supporters of the cause through their actions.

Due to the small sample size, a limitation of exploratory studies is that the results cannot be generalized to the population (Dudovskiy, 2018). It can't be confirmed that with a larger sample size, the results would be the same, but that

would be something to research in the future. Another limitation to this study is the geographical, time, and financial restraints. Conducting one-on-one interviews with consumers from various parts of the United States would allow participants to be genuine and in depth about their attitudes. It would also allow the interviewer to clarify any confusions the participants may have. A study of this type should be conducted to gain more in-depth understanding of how controversy advertising affects individuals.

The next question to consider is: How can corporation become true allies to social change? Advertising and social change are both complex issues involving multiple parties, but in the continuously changing social climate, it is important for corporations to understand where they fit in and how they can effectively join the conversation. By bringing the advertiser and the consumer's perceptions together, advertisers will not only be able to create more effective campaigns, but also become true allies to social change.

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Appendix A- Interview with Doug Lowell

Q: What is your opinion on the presence of controversial issues in advertising?

Do you think it is ethical?

A: There's a lecture that I heard a few years ago from Mark Rey, a director at North Advertising. He was talking about something called "cultural permission".

Companies need to have cultural permission to come off as genuine and have a successful campaign.

Q: But how do you know when a company has cultural permission?

A: Well that's where the advertising agency comes in. The job of an agency is to provide a neutral third party perspective on the situation. Gauging cultural permission isn't a science, it's an art. It's about sensitivity to the society and culture around you. You can't really prove it... you just know. I was at Deutsch when they created the first TV commercial featuring a gay couple for IKEA, and that was so well received by the gay community. They felt like IKEA was giving them a voice. How did Deutsch know that IKEA had cultural permission? They just did. On the flip side, when you look at the disaster that was the Pepsi-Jenner advertisement, it was clear that they didn't have an advertising agency- well not that they didn't have one, but they had an internal one. An internal agency is still controlled by the corporation, so they are stuck doing whatever the bosses tell them instead of approaching it from a rational point of view. If the Pepsi people were an independent agency, they would've realized that Pepsi didn't have cultural permission to make an ad like that.

Q: How can a company like Absolut Vodka begin to build cultural permission if their product is seen as harmful?

A: They always say, action first. A brand needs to start from within, like starting programs that support underrepresented employees, and programs that help the community. Once they start doing that, people's perception of them will change.

Q: So if a brand comes to an agency and says 'hey we want to promote our support of a certain social issue', how do you think that would go down?

A: Well the advertising agency would take that and look at whether or not that is actually a viable option for the brand. This is why picking a GOOD agency is so important. There are a lot of agencies that would sell out and just do whatever the brand wants, but good agencies are value-driven. They wouldn't put out a campaign that they don't believe in.

Appendix B- Survey

Q1 What gender do you identify with?

- Male (1)
 - Female (2)
 - Gender Neutral (3)
 - Others (4)
-

Q2 How would you categorize yourself on the following scale with respect to your political beliefs?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Liberal	<input type="radio"/>	Conservative						

Q3 Which political party do you associate with more?

- Democrat (1)
 - Republican (2)
 - Independent (3)
 - Other (4) _____
 - Prefer not to answer (5)
-

Q4 In general, how often do you drink Coca Cola in a week?

	Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)
Frequency (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q5 Coca Cola states that one of their key corporate values is diversity. Do the corporate values of Coca Cola affect your consumption of their products?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Not sure (3)

Q6 How familiar are you with the current conversation surrounding immigration?

	Unfamiliar (1)	Moderately familiar (2)	Very familiar (3)
Familiarity (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q7 In general, where do you stand on the topic of immigration?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Looser Immigration Laws	<input type="radio"/>	Stricter Immigration Laws						

Q8 Does this advertisement influence how you think about the issue of immigration? If so, how?

Q9 Does this advertisement influence your perception of Coca Cola as a brand? If so, how?

Q10 In general, how often do you use Absolut Vodka products?

	Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)
Frequency (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q11 Absolut Vodka states that one of their key corporate values is diversity. Do the corporate values of Absolut Vodka affect your consumption of their products?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Not sure (3)

Q12 How familiar are you with the current conversation surrounding transgender rights?

	Unfamiliar (1)	Moderately familiar (2)	Very familiar (3)
Familiarity (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q13 In general, where do you stand on the topic of transgender rights?

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	
Pro transgender rights	<input type="radio"/>	Against transgender rights						

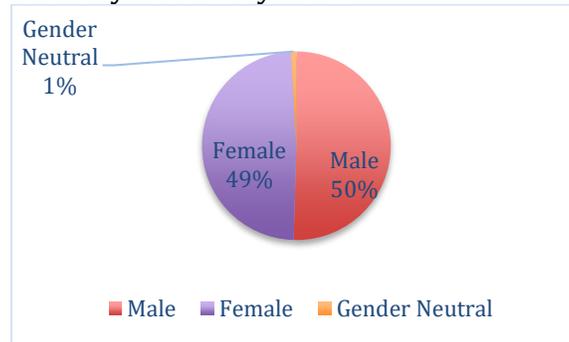
Q14 Does this advertisement influence the way you think about transgender rights, or how you personally view transgender people? Explain.

Q15 Does this advertisement change your perception of Absolut Vodka as a brand? Will it affect your buying of their products?

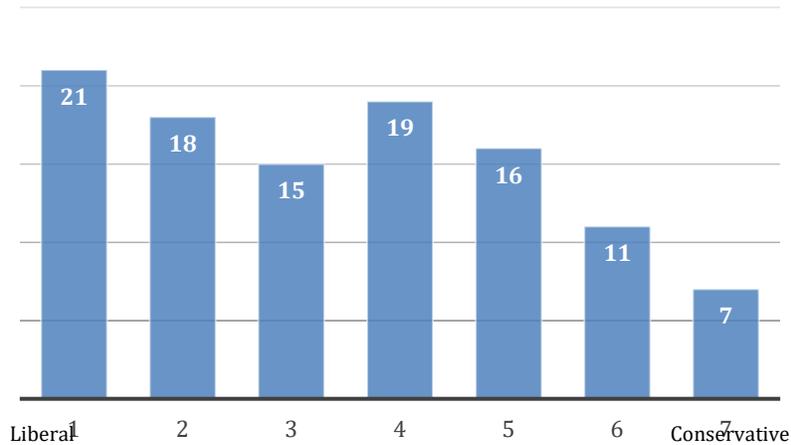
Q16 Overall, what is your opinion of the presence of controversial social issues such as immigration and transgender rights in corporate advertisements?

Appendix B: Survey Results

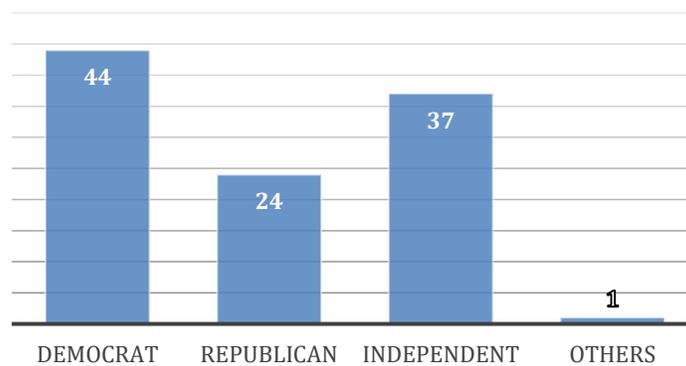
Question 1: What gender do you identify with?



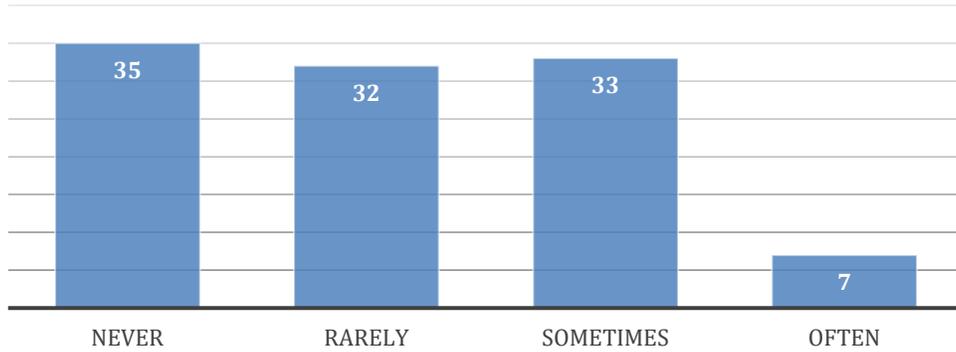
Question 2: How do you categorize yourself on the following scale with respect to your political beliefs? (scale from liberal to conservative)



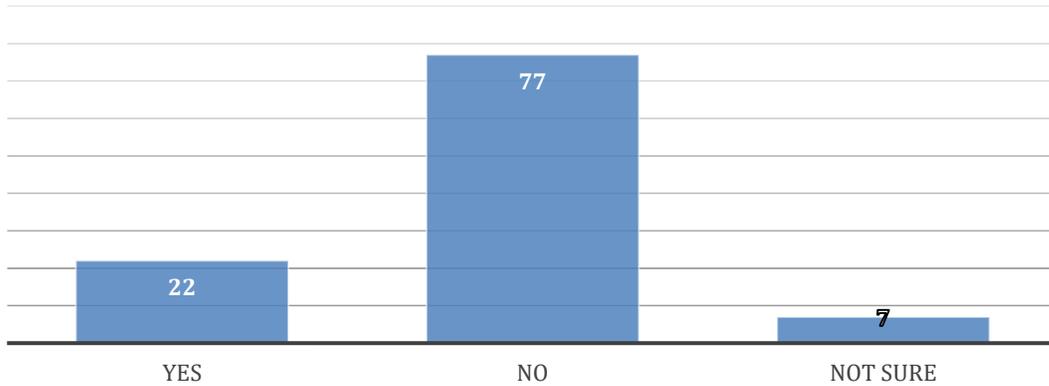
Question 3: Which political party do you associate with more?



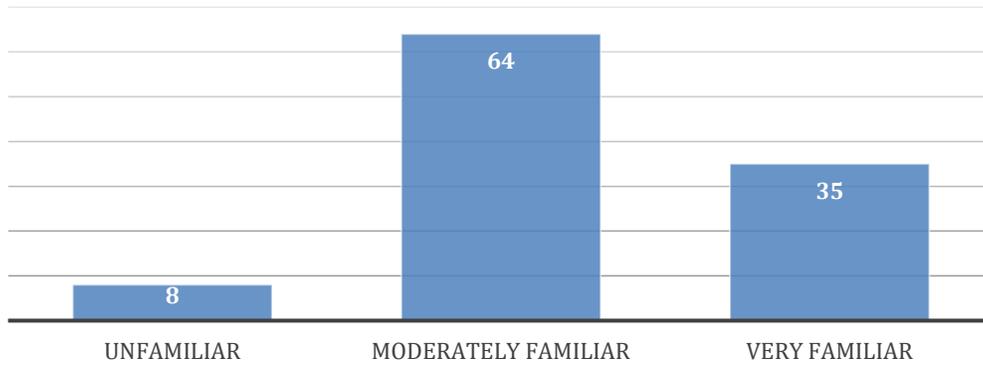
Question 4: In general how often do you drink Coca Cola in a week?



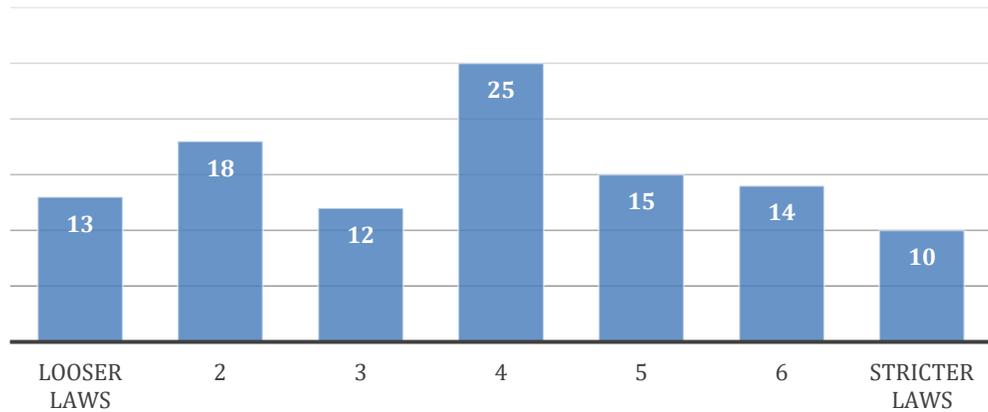
Question 5: Coca Cola states that one of their key corporate values is diversity. Do the corporate values of Coca Cola affect your consumption of their products?



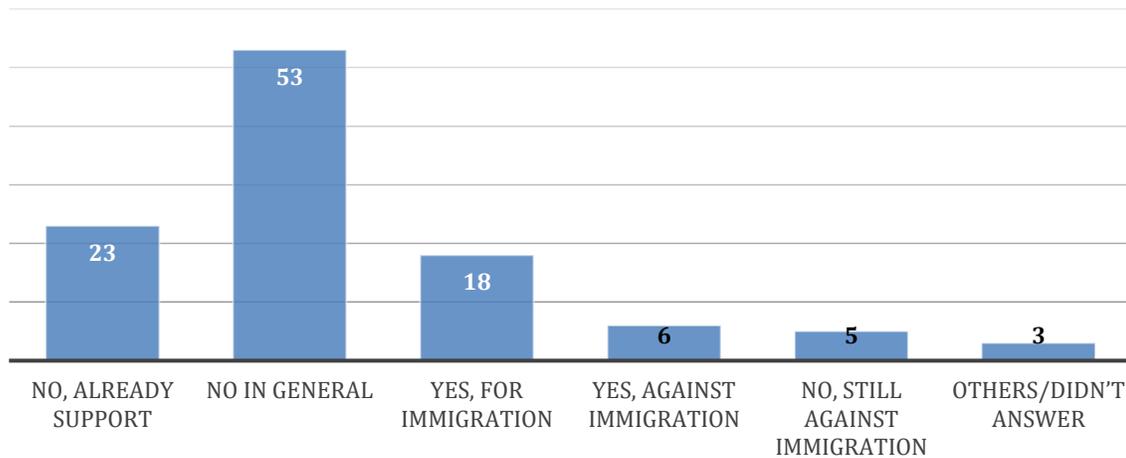
Question 6: How familiar are you with the current conversation surrounding immigration?



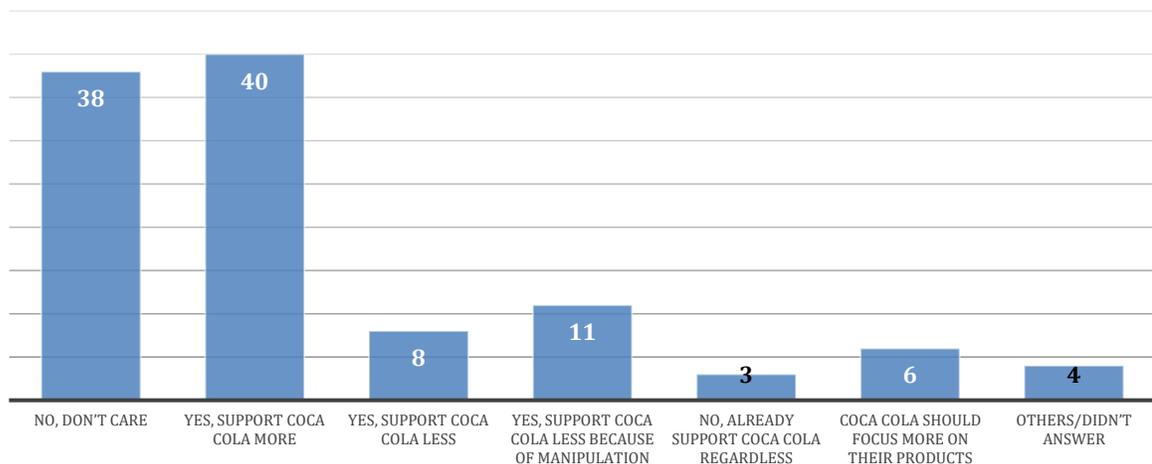
Question 7: In general, where do you stand on the topic of immigration? (Scale from looser laws to stricter laws)



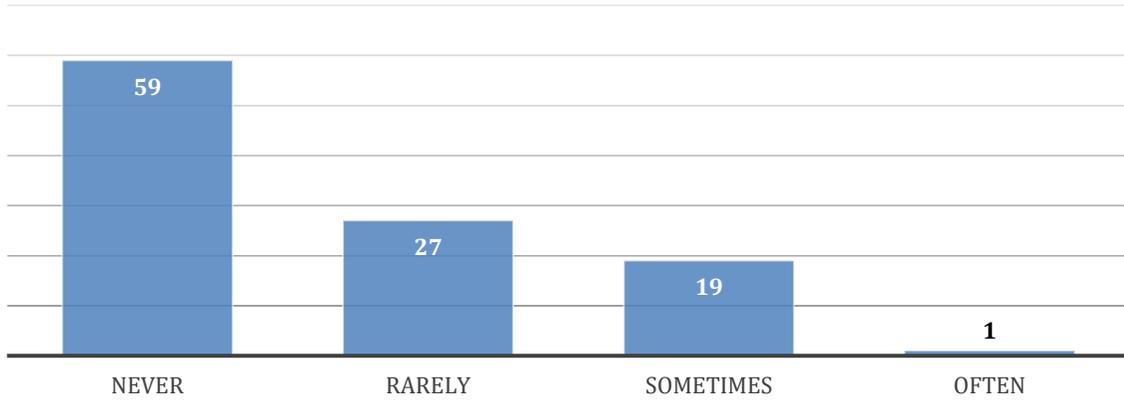
Question 8: Does this advertisement influence how you think about the issue of immigration? If so, how? (Open ended)



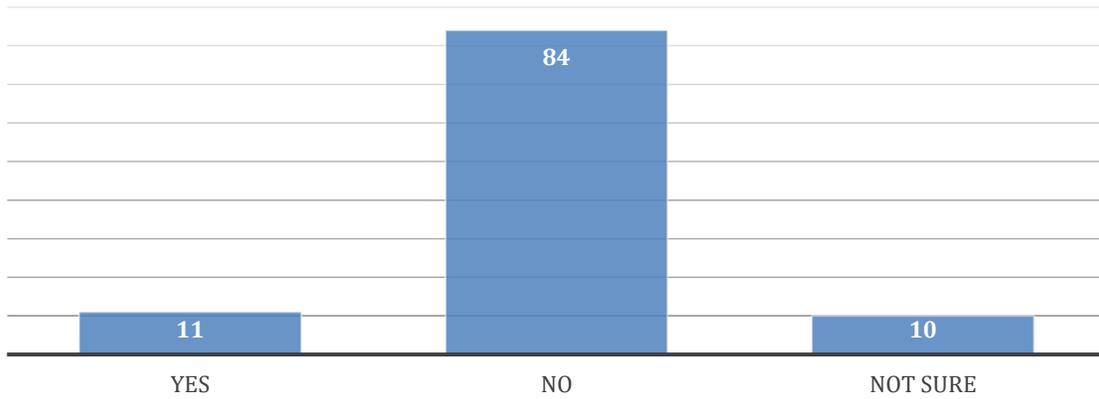
Question 9: Does this advertisement influence your perception of Coca Cola as a brand? If so, how? (Open ended)



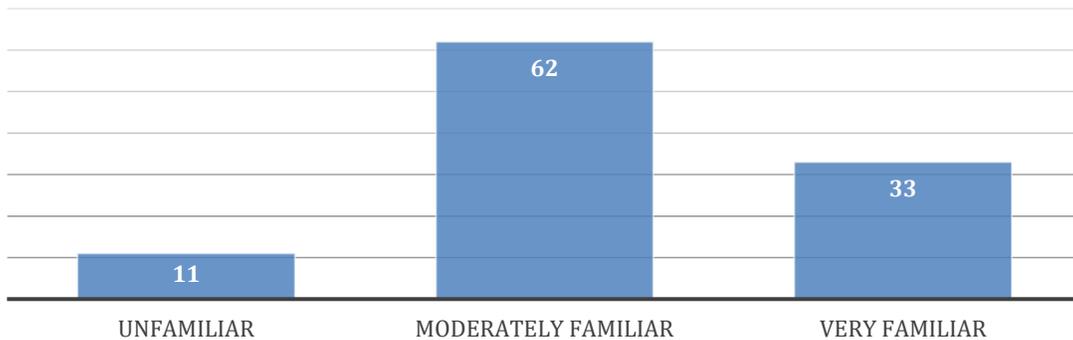
Question 10: In general, how often do you use Absolut Vodka products?



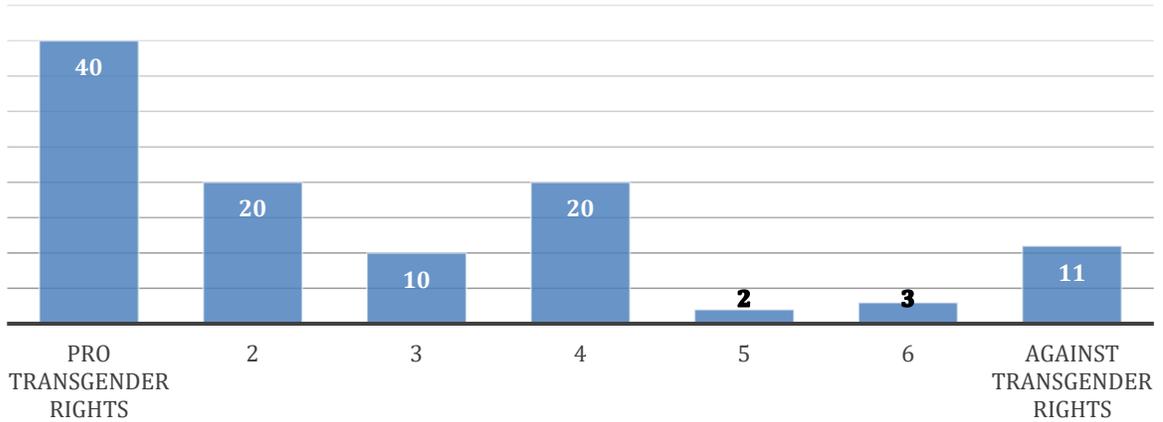
Question 11: Absolut Vodka states that one of their key corporate values is diversity. Do the corporate values of Absolut Vodka affect your consumption of their products?



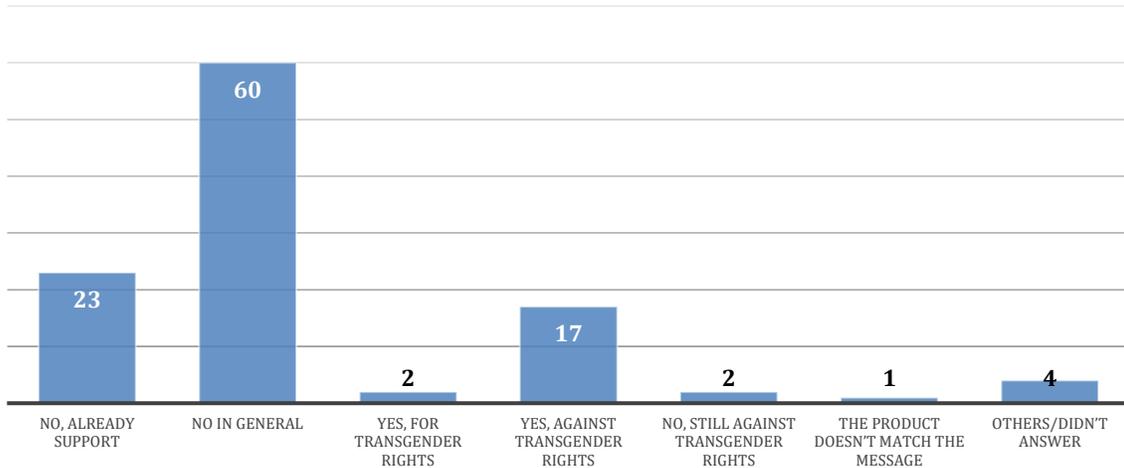
Question 12: How familiar are you with the current conversation surrounding transgender rights?



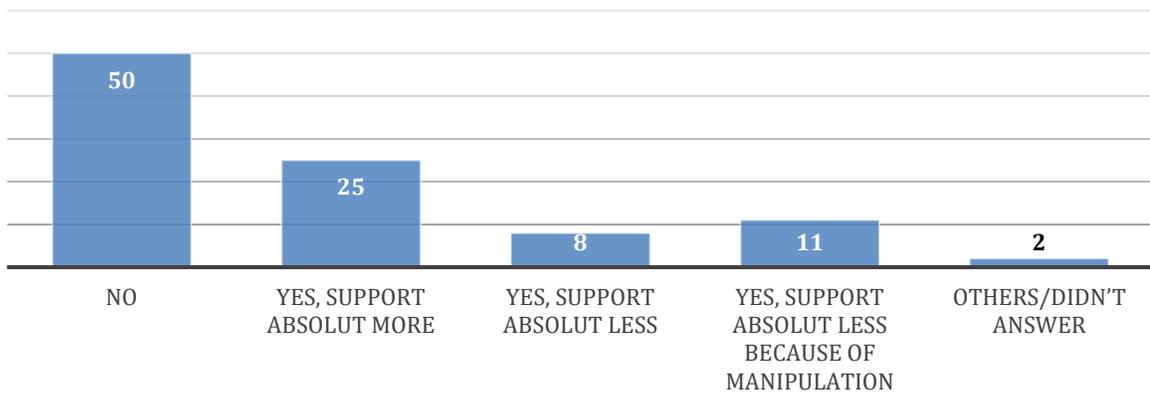
Question 13: In general, where do you stand on the topic of transgender rights?



Question 14: Does this advertisement influence the way you think about transgender rights, or how you personally view transgender people? Explain. (Open ended)



Question 15: Does this advertisement change your perception of Absolut Vodka as a brand? Will it affect your buying of their products? (Open ended)



Question 16: Overall, what is your opinion of the presence of controversial social issues such as immigration and transgender rights in corporate advertisements? (Open ended)

