
Between Emotion and Rejection: The Consumer in the Age of Controversy

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Abstract

The growing saturation of the advertising environment is driving brands to adopt provocative strategies to capture audience attention. Although the use of controversial themes is effective in increasing awareness, it entails high reputational risks. This study analyses, through a literature review, the impact of controversial campaigns on consumers' emotional reactions and ideological perceptions. The findings show that controversy can intensify emotional bonding or trigger profound rejection, depending on the alignment between brand values and those of its audiences. Moreover, the strategic management of controversy, grounded in authenticity and communicational coherence, is essential to transform risks into opportunities for differentiation and to build loyal brand communities.

Keywords: controversial marketing; consumer perception; ideological alignment; brand reputation

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of provocative campaigns reflects brands' struggle to differentiate themselves in an environment saturated with advertising messages (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Adopting controversial strategies seeks to capture consumer attention but can also generate polarisation and reputational risks (Leonidou et al., 2012).

In an era in which emotional engagement is valuable, the capacity to elicit intense reactions has become a key element of digital campaigns. However, consumer response is increasingly mediated by ideological and emotional filters that accentuate audience fragmentation.

Additionally, the proliferation of digital platforms has substantially changed how controversy is perceived and disseminated (Diaz Ruiz, 2023). The combination of viral amplification capacity and algorithms that favour polarising content means brands must manage the emotional and reputational impacts of their campaigns with even greater care.

According to Bertaglia, Goanta and Iamnitchi (2024), "monetising toxicity" is reflected in how controversial content spreads more rapidly and generates financial incentives for its perpetuation. This new context demands a clear brand ethical stance and a strategic approach based on active monitoring and communicational coherence.

This article analyses the polarisation of consumer reactions and the influence of ideological alignment on their perception of controversial campaigns.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. POLARISATION OF CONSUMER REACTIONS

Consumer reaction polarisation is a well-documented phenomenon in recent literature (Diaz Ruiz, 2023). Campaigns appealing to strong positive or negative emotions tend to provoke extreme reactions, splitting audiences into enthusiastic advocates and fervent critics. This effect is amplified by social network architecture, favouring the dissemination of content that generates controversy and high engagement.

Tu and Neumann (2022) contend that "polarising virality" dynamics result from emotional and technological factors. Recommendation algorithms tend to prioritise content that provokes intense emotions, creating opinion bubbles and reinforcing social fragmentation. This context complicates brand reputation management, which must anticipate divergent audience reactions.

Furthermore, Bertaglia et al. (2024) argue that perceived authenticity and value alignment moderate the intensity of polarisation. Campaigns seen as sincere and consistent with brand identity tend to mitigate adverse reactions, whereas communications perceived as opportunistic or manipulative exacerbate emotional division. Authenticity management thus emerges as a central strategy for minimising the adverse effects of polarisation in controversial campaigns.

2.2 Ideological alignment and consumer perceptions

Controversy can act as a catalyst for emotional engagement or radical rejection. Brands that genuinely align their values with those of their target audience reap benefits in loyalty and advocacy. Positive examples, such as Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign (Johnston & Taylor, 2008), demonstrate that authenticity is central to transforming controversy into brand equity.

Conversely, campaigns viewed as opportunistic elicit intense adverse reactions with lasting effects on reputation (Leonidou et al., 2012). The phenomenon of social-media “cancellation” is a real risk for brands that fail to meet audiences’ ideological expectations.

Moreover, polarisation resulting from misaligned campaigns can accentuate sociocultural divisions and alienate relevant market segments. Repeated exposure to messages perceived as ill-suited to consumers’ sociopolitical context fosters antagonism, accelerating the erosion of brand trust.

Some brands capitalise on ideological segmentation in highly polarised social contexts to consolidate an extremely loyal customer base. This strategy, however, requires surgical precision in target definition and rigorous narrative management, as any inconsistency can trigger crises amplified by social-media dynamics.

Recent studies (Diaz Ruiz, 2023) highlight that campaigns exploring sensitive topics, such as social justice or sustainability, must ensure that consistent actions back their positioning to avoid accusations of “virtue signalling”. Perceived incoherence between communication and practice can amplify distrust and negative polarisation.

Cinelli and LeBoeuf (2020) note that authenticity judgements are immediate and intuitive; consumers rapidly assess whether a brand’s action appears genuine or opportunistic. Therefore, congruence between organisational practices and narrative communication becomes crucial to reduce rejection risks in ideologically risky campaigns.

Additionally, Painter et al. (2024) emphasise that emotional narrative plays a decisive role in how controversial messages are received. Strategic use of authentic stories, real testimonies, and consumer-centred communication strengthens emotional bonds while cushioning potential adverse reactions from ideological polarisation.

3. METHODOLOGY

To conduct this literature review, a search was conducted in the Scopus database using the string : “(((controversies* OR provocative OR backlash OR "emotional response*" OR "emotional engagement") AND ("marketing campaign" OR "digital marketing" OR "social media marketing" OR "influencer marketing")) OR "controversial marketing")” on the 12th January 2025. The authors filtered the results for articles published between 2013 and 2024 in the English language. One hundred and two records were retrieved, and after screening titles and abstracts, searching for full papers and analysing full texts, the authors decided to include 18 articles in the review.

4. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The findings show that controversial campaigns generate high engagement levels. Berger and Milkman (2012) confirm that provocative content is more likely to be shared and commented on, enhancing visibility on social networks. However, Diaz Ruiz (2023) and Tu and Neumann’s (2022) “polarising virality” model demonstrates that the exact mechanism amplifies audience polarisation, as algorithms privilege extreme reactions. The intensity of emotional response is proportional to the degree of ideological alignment-or conflict—between the brand message and audience values, as evidenced by Bertaglia, Goanta and Iamnitchi’s (2024) description of the “monetisation of toxicity”.

Polarisation intensifies in digital environments through algorithmic reinforcement mechanisms that create echo chambers and ideological bubbles, perpetuating selective exposure to content consonant with users’

beliefs (Tu & Neumann, 2022; Diaz Ruiz, 2023). This fragmentation hampers the construction of broadly positive reputations and requires increasingly surgical campaign segmentation. Oriakhi, Amin and Safdar (2023) warn that any calibration error can precipitate crises amplified by viral dynamics. In parallel, brand-authenticity literature confirms that value alignment between organisation and consumer is decisive for loyalty and reputational risk mitigation (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020; Leonidou et al., 2012).

Beyond immediate impact, each controversy leaves a digital trail that can be reactivated in future contexts. Timmermans et al.'s (2017) ControCurator platform demonstrates how collective intelligence can map historical trajectories of public debates and identify escalation points; these data underscore the need for longitudinal monitoring and early-warning indicators to safeguard symbolic brand capital. Thus, controversy management should extend beyond the campaign, encompassing continuous data collection, analysis and response cycles.

Finally, a governance framework grounded in proven authenticity and operational transparency is recommended. Research on cause-related marketing demonstrates that the effectiveness of contentious initiatives depends on coherence between discourse and practice: Barone, Miyazaki and Taylor (2000) show that verifiable donations increase purchase intention, whereas Webb and Mohr (1998) classify consumers along a scepticism-commitment spectrum depending on the evidence of impact provided. Socio-environmental performance reports, supported by shareable multimedia formats, reinforce perceptions of responsibility, limiting the scope for adverse interpretations and disciplining the informational ecosystem that might otherwise amplify destabilising narratives.

Impacts of polarisation and ideological alignment

Controversy can catalyse emotional engagement or radical rejection. Brands that genuinely align their values with those of their target audience gain loyalty and advocacy. Positive examples, such as Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign (Johnston & Taylor, 2008), show that authenticity is central to converting controversy into brand capital.

Conversely, campaigns perceived as opportunistic elicit intense adverse reactions with long-lasting reputational effects (Leonidou et al., 2012). Social-media "cancellation" is a risk for brands failing to manage audiences' ideological expectations.

Misaligned campaigns can also heighten sociocultural divisions and alienate key market segments. Research on ethical-value incoherence shows that business decisions perceived as opportunistic or unethical deteriorate corporate image, foster dissatisfaction, and reduce purchase intention (Leonidou, Kvasova, Leonidou & Chari, 2012). Repeated exposure to messages judged ill-suited to consumers' sociopolitical context intensifies antagonism, accelerating the erosion of brand trust; this effect is reinforced by algorithms amplifying polarising content and by recently documented "polarising virality" dynamics (Diaz Ruiz, 2023; Tu & Neumann, 2022).

Some brands capitalise on ideological segmentation in highly polarised contexts to consolidate an extremely loyal consumer base. Identity-alignment literature indicates that consumer involvement is an extension of self-identity, making loyalty remarkably resilient when the brand mirrors shared values (Diaz Ruiz, 2023). However, this strategy demands surgical precision in target definition and rigorous narrative management, as any inconsistency can trigger crises amplified by the "monetisation of toxicity" dynamics described by Bertaglia, Goanta and Iamnitchi (2024).

Management of controversies in digital marketing

Effective controversy management requires active monitoring of online discourse, rapid crisis response and absolute coherence between discourse and organisational practice. Studies on disinformation and polarisation on digital platforms show that agility in detecting sensitive topics and correcting narratives prevents escalation into reputational crises (Diaz Ruiz, 2023; Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020).

Strategies based on social listening and ideological segmentation make it possible to identify, in real time, audience clusters more prone to conflict, allowing differentiated, damage-mitigating responses. Literature on viral dynamics and “polarising virality” indicates that tailoring content to the emotional motivations of target groups reduces adverse reaction intensity and enhances controversy as a differentiation tool (Tu & Neumann, 2022; Bertaglia, Goanta & Iamnitchi, 2024).

Beyond tactical practices, brands must have contingency plans for scenarios of extreme polarisation. Preparing multiple audience-reaction trajectories, backed by clear action protocols across social networks, enables narrative control before controversy escalates into a severe reputational crisis (Rahman, 2024; Oriakhi, Amin & Safdar, 2023). This strategic anticipation, reinforced by crisis simulations and early-warning metrics, supports consumer trust and preserves the brand’s symbolic integrity (Mustafa et al., 2024).

Another critical pillar is the qualification of credible spokespersons, both internal and external, capable of communicating the brand’s position with authenticity and empathy. Empirical evidence shows that controversial campaigns accompanied by opinion leaders consistent with the values advocated reduce the negative impact of polarisation (Painter, Vierrether & Guimarães, 2024; Baym & Boyd, 2012). Investment in media training and constructing networks of reputational allies thus emerges as an essential strategic component in managing high-emotional-risk campaigns.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Controversial campaigns are powerful instruments in digital marketing, capable of generating awareness and emotional engagement. However, they carry high risks related to reaction polarisation and the need for ideological alignment between brand and consumer. Perceived authenticity, value congruence and strategic crisis management are critical factors for maximising benefits and mitigating risks.

It is also important to recognise that, though risky, polarisation can strategically consolidate highly loyal consumer communities. Brands adopting clear, consistent positions can turn controversy into symbolic capital among ideologically aligned audiences, reinforcing their market differentiation (Diaz Ruiz, 2023).

Furthermore, real-time monitoring of consumer reactions is essential for rapidly adjusting communication strategies. Social-listening tools and sentiment analysis are indispensable for detecting emerging trends, anticipating crises and reinforcing perceptions of brand authenticity and social responsibility (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020).

Finally, successful use of controversy in digital marketing requires a holistic, integrated approach. Building authentic campaigns, supported by concrete actions and aligned with the brand’s genuine values, not only strengthens emotional links with consumers but also protects reputation in contexts of high social volatility (Painter et al., 2024).

The authors acknowledge some limitations to this study. Although the process of selecting research papers followed the commonly used steps, using a protocol like PRISMA could enhance the rigor and replicability of the study, making it more robust. The literature search was conducted exclusively using the Scopus database, which, although comprehensive, may not capture all relevant studies available in other academic repositories such as Web of Science.

Future research could build on this review by conducting empirical studies that test the impact of controversial campaigns across different cultural and ideological contexts, particularly using experimental or longitudinal designs. There is also a need to explore how algorithmic content amplification and real-time audience segmentation shape consumer responses to controversy in digital spaces. developing conceptual models that integrate emotional, ideological, and reputational variables could provide a more predictive

understanding of brand risk and loyalty outcomes. Including grey literature and industry data in future reviews may also help bridge the gap between academic insights and practical applications.

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