

## CONTROVERSIAL ADVERTISING AND THE ROLE OF BELIEFS, EMOTIONS AND ATTITUDES: THE CASE OF SPIRIT AIRLINES

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*Over the last 20 years, a growing number of articles have been published discussing the effect of controversial advertising content and appeal on consumer behaviors and attitudes. This research adds to the literature and focuses on the process by which controversial advertising affects consumer attitudes. The study examines the controversial advertising strategy of one company, Spirit Airlines. In particular, this research examines if beliefs about controversial advertising in general mediated by emotions impact individuals' attitudes about Spirit Airlines' controversial ads specifically. The sample included 234 students from a University in the Southeastern United States as well as members of the local community. Respondents completed part of the survey, assessing demographics, and general beliefs about controversial ads, before being presented with a series of Spirit Airlines' controversial ads. After exposure to the advertisements, respondents completed the remainder of the survey assessing emotions as well as attitudes (cognitive and affective) resulting from exposure to the ads. Findings did not reveal evidence that individuals' affective attitudes towards controversial ads are affected by general beliefs about this advertising strategy. However, the study did reveal a positive relationship between individuals' general beliefs and cognitive attitudes towards controversial ads. Additionally, positive and negative emotions did mediate the relationship between general beliefs and cognitive as well as affective attitudes.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades, the use of controversial advertising has made its way into mainstream marketing practices and research (e.g. Dahl, Frankenberg, & Manchanda, 2003; deRun & Ting, 2014; Pope, Voges, & Brown, 2004; Sabri, 2017, 2012; Sabri & Obermiller, 2012, Waller, 2005, Waller, Deshpande, Zafer, & Erdogan, 2013). Advertisers deliberately use shocking and offensive images and messages to attract consumer attention and arouse curiosity. Benetton's advertising campaign in the late 1980s is credited with pioneering provocative advertising messages (Vézina & Paul, 1997). At that time, the company introduced visual images, unrelated to the brand, of a black woman breastfeeding a white baby, a priest in black kissing a nun in white, and other shocking images to raise awareness of its "United Colors of Benetton" clothing line. Other companies, such as Calvin Klein, Esprit, and Diesel, quickly followed suit. Today, with

the goal of gaining consumer attention and increasing sales, the use of controversial advertising spans across all types of products and industries.

Empirical evidence suggests that controversial advertising does increase attention and recall of the message. For example, Dahl and colleagues (2003) found that advertisement designed to provoke shock in viewers resulted in increased attention, above and beyond information-based content. Sabri (2012) discovered that an optimum level of taboo advertisement can attract attention and recall.

However, it is not clear whether consumers hold positive or negative attitudes toward controversial advertising. Vézina and Paul (1997) found that consumers in general hold positive attitudes towards provocation; however, slightly provocative ads are better received than extremely provocative ones. Other research shows that shocking ads are effective in capturing the attention of consumers, yet they do not result in positive attitudes towards the advertisement or brand (Bello, Pitts, and Etzel, 1983). Other research

found that provocative messages and images gain viewers' attention but arouse negative feelings and attitudes, which transfer to the brand and negatively affect purchase decisions (Chan et al., 2007). Gould (1994) explained that negative feelings induced by controversial ads result from the violation of social norms. In some incidences, controversial advertising has even led to calls for bans of ads or boycotts of the advertised brands (Crosier & Erdogan, 2001; Jardine, 2006; Millan & Elliott, 2004).

Pope and colleagues (2004) studied the effect of provocative and mild erotic imagery advertisement on consumer attitudes. Participants were asked about their attitudes toward provocative appeals for a cause as opposed to provocative appeals for standard consumer products. Results suggest that people prefer mildly erotic ads and that an organization using mild erotica in appeals for a cause will be viewed more favorably where the erotica is congruent with the cause (Pope et al., 2004). DeRun and Ting (2014) elicited beliefs about controversial advertising to study the formation of attitudes toward the ads. The study focused on the beliefs about two controversial products, political parties and sexual disease prevention. Findings showed that the prior belief about the advertisement affected the attitude toward the message. The advertisement of political parties was believed to be misleading and resulted in a negative attitude toward the ads and the ads of sexual diseases prevention was regarded as educational and resulted in a more positive attitude toward the message. This research suggests that the effect of controversial advertising on consumer attitudes and emotions is complex and should be studied in more depth. While controversial advertisement seems to raise attention, message recall and brand recognition, findings are mixed regarding the relationship between generally accepted societal norms or beliefs towards controversial advertising and individual emotions and attitudes (e.g. Dens et al., 2008; deRun & Ting, 2014; Kadić-Maglajlić et al. 2017; Pope et al., 2004; Sabri 2017, 2012).

The research adds to this literature and focuses on the process by which controversial advertising affects consumer attitudes. The study examines the controversial advertising strategy of one company, Spirit Airlines. In

particular, this research examines whether beliefs about controversial advertising in general, mediated by emotions, impact individuals' attitudes about Spirit Airlines controversial ads specifically. We use Lavidge and Steiner's *Hierarchy of Effects Model* (1961) to separated attitudes into affective, including liking and preferences, and cognitive, including awareness and knowledge. This encourages a better understanding of the process by which individuals' beliefs about controversial advertising influence affective and cognitive attitudes. We also build on Edell and Burke's (1987) *Conceptual Model of the Role of Feelings in Advertising* by adding general beliefs about controversial advertising. Although prior research has investigated the mediating role of emotions on consumer responses to advertisement, this work focused on positive emotions (Moore and Hoenig, 1989). In this study we looked at both positive as well as negative emotions and propose a model (see Figure 1) where emotions represent the mediator of the relationship between general beliefs and attitudes toward controversial advertising.

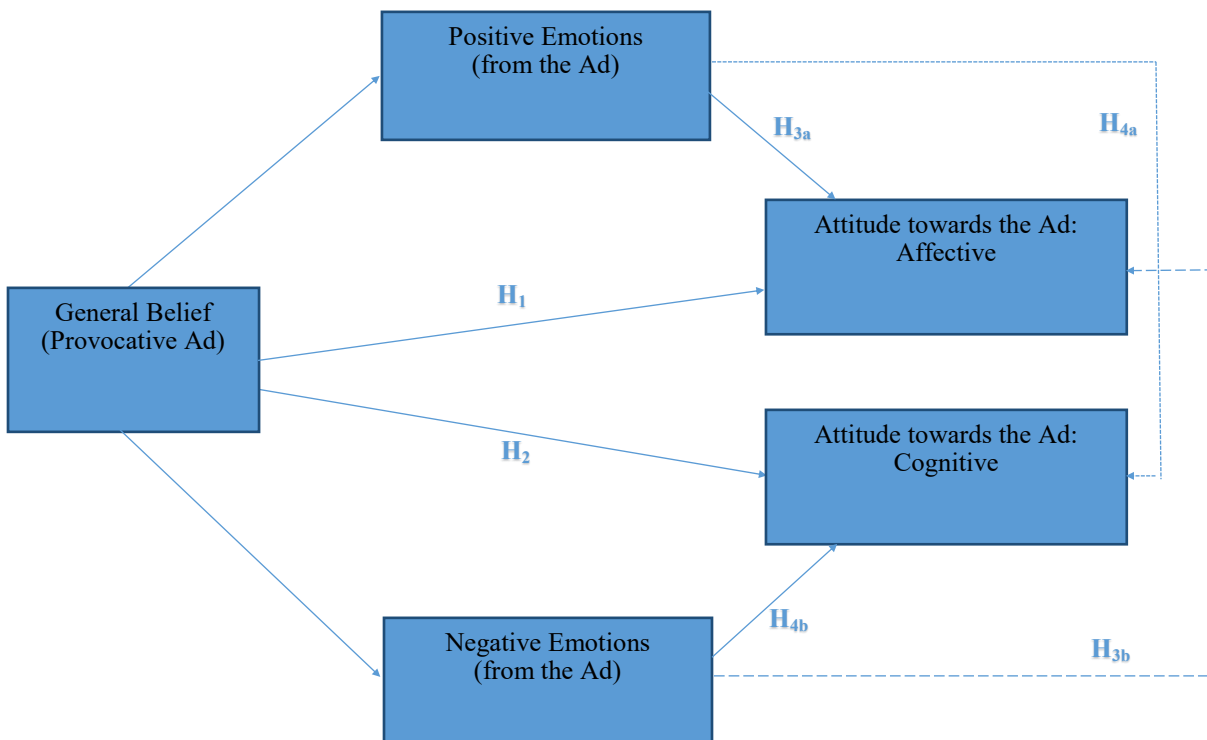
First, we review the literature on controversial advertising with a focus on the beliefs and attitudes about controversial advertising. Second, we develop hypotheses related to the relationship between general beliefs and attitudes about controversial advertising and the mediating role emotions present in this relationship. Third, we describe the methodology and analysis of the research. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the result and the limitations of the research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Controversial Advertising

Companies utilize controversial advertisements (ads) to gain the attention of consumers, raise brand and product awareness, and increase sales (e.g. Erdogan, 2008; Pope et al., 2004; Waller, 2005). Advertisement campaigns such as the ones introduced by Benetton "won awards for heightening public awareness of social issues but have also provoked public outrage and consumer complaints (Dahl et al., 2003, p. 268)." For example, Benetton's death row campaign resulted in public outcry (Curtis,

**FIGURE 1:**  
**Emotions Mediate the Relationship Between Beliefs and Attitudes**



2002) and Calvin Klein's campaigns, that allegedly used images of child pornography, resulted in widespread boycotts and public outcry (Irvine, 2000). Even though controversial ads can result in negative outcomes, many companies apply this strategy in hopes to cut through the media clutter and gain consumer attention (e.g. Erdogan, 2008; Pope et al., 2004; Waller, 2005). This has led to a growing body of research on the impact and effectiveness of controversial advertising.

Early researchers focused on understanding the difference between controversial (i.e. offensive) products and controversial (i.e. offensive) execution. For example, Barnes and Dotson (1990) exposed respondents to an offensive product task and asked them to rate twenty-one actual commercials from very offensive to not offensive. The most offensive ads found in the task were the ads used in a very personal context (i.e. condoms, feminine wash, tampons). Results revealed that females more than males, the less educated compared to college graduates, younger rather than older respondents, married compared to single respondents and regular church attendees

tended to rate the product ads as more offensive. The authors also suggested that an ad, no matter the product offensiveness, can be found to be offensive by the nature of the execution of the ad. Also, Beard (2008) in an analysis of complaints filed about controversial ads in New Zealand, found consumers were more offended by the theme (execution) of the ad than the product or service itself.

Christy and Haley (2008) investigated the influence of advertising context (e.g. product type, executional style) on perceptions of offence. Respondents were not exposed to actual ads, but ad scenarios including four product conditions (e.g. advertising for condoms, beer); ten execution elements (e.g. nudity, sexual suggestiveness, fear appeals); and nine media (e.g. television, radio, mail). Results suggest that offensiveness is contingent on contextual influences such that products influence perceptions primarily in traditional media, and in the use of nudity, religious references and violence. Product identification moderated perceptions of offence. For example, respondents who were not informed of a specific product often found ads to be more

offensive than those who were exposed to either a condom, beer, or hand soap ad. Also, religious and political values influenced perceptions of offence, and 'other' media caused the highest overall offense levels. Implications of the study support that context, more than the product, matters when assessing offensiveness. The authors suggest that offensiveness is not a static phenomenon and audiences dislike ads that do not make sense. Christy (2006) interviewed female consumers and found that the ads' context had more impact on perceived offensiveness than the actual product. The author also noted that women will engage in negative word-of-mouth as a coping mechanism to offensive ads.

Waller and colleagues (Fam & Waller, 2003; Waller, 1999; Waller, Deshpande, & Zafer-Erdogan, 2013; Waller, Fam, & Erdogan, 2005) studied the effect of controversial products versus controversial advertising execution. In this line of research, respondents were first asked to rank a list of product categories, not real ads, for offensiveness. Then respondents were asked to rank reasons why they perceived ads to be offensive. The six reasons included racist images, sexist images, nudity, subject too personal, anti-social behavior, and indecent language. Overall, results did not confirm a dominant reason for perceiving ads as offensive. Although, racist images tended to be the most offensive. Among female respondents, sexist images were often rated as the most offensive after racist ads.

A growing body of research has emerged with a focus on investigating controversial advertising execution and its impact on consumers and companies. LaTour and Henthorne (1994) studied the effect of sexual appeals in print advertising using a sample of 199 visitors of a mall in the mid-Gulf Coast region. The authors found that strong overt sexual appeal led to negative attitudes, more so in women compared to men. Dahl and colleagues (2003) examined the effectiveness of shock advertising about HIV/AIDS prevention in two laboratory studies using a population of university students. These studies confirmed that shock actually does attract attention and it can work better than other types of appeals (e.g. fear and information). Pinker (2007) found that marketers capitalize on the automatic, if not

unconscious, ability of taboo ads to attract attention with their choice of brand names. Examples of these include the U.S. fast-food restaurant chain Fuddruckers and the British clothing label FCUK (acronym for French Connection UK). These findings support Vézina and Paul's (1997) conclusion that provocative appeals based on the violation of social norms and transgression of taboos can be an effective and creative strategy for gaining audience attention.

Huhmann and Mott-Stenerson (2008) studied the effect of controversial advertisement execution on elaborative processing and brand message comprehension. The authors conducted an experiment to control attitude toward the ads. Results showed that controversial advertisement executions increase elaboration regardless of the level of product involvement. Subjects with higher product involvement comprehended a controversial advertisement execution better while subjects with lower product involvement comprehended a non-controversial advertisement execution better.

Atkin, McCardle, and Newell (2008) investigated (1) the effect of perceptions of advertiser motives on the evaluation of the socially responsible alcohol moderation ads and (2) the impact of these evaluations on the perception of the overall brand and a company's corporate credibility. Findings revealed that alcohol moderation ads are perceived to be more ambiguous than product ads; consumers may perceive the advertiser's motive as self-serving. Using strategically ambiguous 'responsibility' messages seem to negatively impact both the alcohol manufacturer's corporate credibility and consumer purchase intentions.

Sabri and Obermiller (2012) examined impact of taboo ads (sexuality) on brand attitude and purchase intentions. Overall, when the perception of tabooeness increased, consumer attitudes toward the brand grew negative and purchase intentions decreased. In a follow-up study, Sabri (2017) investigated the impact of different media contexts (i.e., press versus social media) on the effectiveness of controversial taboo (i.e., sexuality, death) ads. The study revealed that communication

medium seems to influence consumer perceptions of controversial ads, as well as perceived subjective norms. Consumers downplay the taboo-ness of a viral controversial ad disseminated by way of social networking sites compared to a controversial ad embedded in a press article. Findings also suggest that controversial viral advertising does not contribute to favorable brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Sabri, 2017).

Kadić-Maglajlić and colleagues (2017) researched the use of controversial advertising in social networking sites. The authors examined the effect of ethical judgment of an ad on controversial ad perception, brand attitude, attitude towards the ad and purchase intentions. Research showed that even though a controversial ad on Facebook may be perceived as ethically acceptable, consumers with a high level of religious commitment still perceive it to be controversial. The study also suggests a negative effect of controversial advertising perceptions on attitudes towards the ad and purchase intentions.

Wirtz, Sparks and Zimbres (2017) conducted a meta-analysis of seventy-eight studies that examined sexual appeals in advertising. Overall, the meta-analysis found mixed results, but supports that sexual appeals that fit with audience expectations, such as perfume or fashion accessories can aid in creating awareness. Ads that “break the mold” or go against expectations are less effective and may create a negative effect that extends to purchase intentions.

Our study extends this research on controversial advertising execution. This advertising strategy seeks to shock, scandalize, surprise and even offend the audience by inducing strong emotional responses such as fear, disgust, arousal, and amusement to the messages or images. Arousal theory explains there exists a direct relationship between emotionally arousing stimuli and attention (LaBar & Phelps, 1998; Mather, 2007). Controversial advertisements are intended to arouse emotions as a result of the emotionally charged stimuli (De Pelsmacker & Van Den Bergh, 1996; Vézina & Paul, 1997), they likely attract more audience attention compared to ads based on

non-arousing or neutral stimuli and affect attitudes toward these ads.

In line with this reasoning, we propose that consumers' general beliefs about controversial ads affect both, their cognitive and affective attitudes toward these ads. More specifically, this effect is mediated by way of the emotions that these ads elicit in consumers. The following sections will explain the proposed model (see Figure 1) in depth and introduce four sets of research hypotheses.

### **General Beliefs About Controversial Advertising**

Beliefs can be defined as descriptive statements about the attributes of objects (Pollay & Mittal, 1993). The marketing literature suggests that beliefs towards controversial advertisement affect consumers' reactions (e.g. Dens et al., 2008; Vézina & Paul, 1997). More specifically, many consumers find controversial advertising socially acceptable and believe it to be entertaining, which in return affects their attitudes towards the product, brand, and specific ads (Dens et al., 2008; deRun & Ting, 2014; Huhmann & Mott-Stenerson, 2004).

We build on this literature and propose a process by which consumers' general beliefs about controversial advertising affect their attitudes towards specific advertisements (see Figure 1). *The Theory of Reasoned Action* (TRA) provides insight into this process. TRA explains that attitude develops from the beliefs individuals hold about the object and that attitude, in return, affects the intention to behave (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen 2010, 1975). TRA suggests that beliefs represent antecedents to an individual's attitude. Empirical evidence for this relationship exists. For example, Pollay and Mittal (1993) identified three distinct personal utility factors (product information, social image information, and hedonic amusement beliefs) and four socioeconomic factors (good for the economy, fostering materialism, corrupting values, falsifying/no-sense) as beliefs that shape consumer attitudes towards advertising. Using a sample of university students from Singapore, Tan and Chia (2007) found that the belief factor of ‘good for the economy’ was positively related to attitudes towards advertising and the

belief factor of 'materialism' was negatively related to attitudes towards advertising.

### Attitude Towards Controversial Advertising

An attitude is "a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related" (Allport, 1935, p. 810). It represents an individual's internal, summative evaluation of an object and represents a stable and enduring predisposition to behave (Mitchell & Olson, 1981) and influences individuals' behaviors and decision making (Simonson & Maushak, 2001).

Some research regarding the effect of provocative advertisement on attitudes exists. For example, Vézina and Paul (1997) used a sample of 204 Canadian university students to study the effect of provocative advertisement used by the clothing industry on consumer attitudes. The authors found that provocative appeals did increase consumer awareness and that respondents reacted more negatively towards the more provocative ads. In another study, researchers compared the reactions of German and Chinese consumers to controversial advertising (Chan et al., 2007). The study of 563 undergraduate and graduate students from universities in Shanghai and South Western Germany revealed that Chinese respondents were less accepting of offensive advertising than their German counterparts. The study also found that two print ads using sexually oriented body images resulted in significant negative perceptions of the advertisement and the brand. The more negative the ads were perceived, the higher the likelihood of rejecting the products and the brands, especially for the Chinese sample (Chan et al., 2007).

The *Hierarchy-of-Effects Model*, developed by Lavidge and Steiner (1961), explains how ads affect individuals' attitudes. The model proposes that advertisement impacts the viewers across three states: the cognitive state (awareness and knowledge), the affective state (liking and preferences), and finally the conative state (conviction and purchase). Vézina and Paul (1997) assessed consumer beliefs about the cognitive, affective, and

conative attributes of provocative ads and their effect on consumer attitudes and behaviors. The authors drew on the Hierarchy-of-Effect Model to explain that cognitive attributes refer to the belief that provocative ads increase consumer awareness and knowledge of the brand and product. Affective attributes refer to the belief that consumers have preferences for liking provocative advertisement. Conative attributes refer to the belief that provocative ads have an effect on consumer purchase intentions. The authors found that provocative appeals do increase awareness and knowledge of the brand and product and that individuals seem to have a general positive appreciation for provocative appeals. However, mildly provocative ads seem to be better received than highly provocative ones.

Dens et al. (2008) found that disgusting advertisements led to a significantly more negative attitude towards the ad than non-disgusting advertising. The authors found that disgusting advertisements induced negative attitudes towards the advertisements and did not lead to better brand recall. In another study exposing 240 consumers recruited via a web panel to assess the effects of taboo themes in advertising, researchers found that the use of sexual and death taboo themes in ads produced a more negative attitude towards the brand (Sabri & Obermiller, 2012). This suggests that the effect of provocative advertisement on individuals' attitudes is rather complex.

### General Belief-Individual Attitude Relationship

In summary, TRA suggests that individuals' general beliefs about an object directly influence their lasting attitudes towards it, ultimately affecting individuals' behaviors (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). Based on the literature review above we propose the hypotheses depicted in Figure 1. Attitudes can be influenced by exposing individuals to different types of stimuli. The effects of a stimulus on attitude can be understood only if its effect on an individual's beliefs is known. Individuals commonly hold specific beliefs about an object prior to stimuli exposure. Once they are exposed to the stimuli, the prior belief about the object is either confirmed or rejected, shaping the attitude of the individual (Fishbein

& Ajzen, 2010, 1975). We expect that general beliefs about controversial advertisements affect individuals' attitudes toward these ads.

In this study, controversial advertising represents the object and provocative advertising represents the stimuli. The exposure to the stimuli, Spirit Airlines' provocative ads, is directly related to the formation of either new attitudes or confirming the existing general beliefs regarding the object, controversial advertisement. The Hierarchy-of-Effect Model explains that advertisement impacts individuals via cognitive and affective attributes. Therefore, we expect that general beliefs about controversial advertisement also relate to affective and cognitive attitudes toward controversial advertisement:

- H<sub>1</sub>:** General beliefs about controversial advertising are positively related to *affective attitudes* towards controversial advertising.
- H<sub>2</sub>:** General beliefs about controversial advertising are positively related to *cognitive attitudes* towards controversial advertising.

### The Mediating Role of Emotions

Studying individuals' responses to ads, including their emotional reactions, helps to understand how these ads influence individuals (e.g. Allen et al., 1988; Chan et al., 2007; Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001). Research on emotional responses to ads shows that advertisements can shape the attitudes of individuals and increase the effectiveness of advertisements (Burke and Edell, 1987; Perugini and Bagozzi, 2001). The goal of inducing strong emotional reactions to advertisements is to increase the attention and awareness of the audience and ultimately induce a behavioral reaction (e.g. Chan et al., 2007; Dens et al., 2008).

Emotions represent "a mental state of readiness that arises from cognitive appraisals of events of thoughts; has a phenomenological tone; is accompanied by a physiological process; is often expressed physically (e.g. in gesture, posture, facial features); and may result in specific actions to affirm or cope for the person having it (Bagozzi et al., 1999, p. 184)." Emotions differ from attitudes. Individuals likely experience a wide range of emotions in

response to stimuli such as watching an ad. The main difference between the two is that an arousal state is required to form emotions. Attitudes, but not emotions, can be formed in response to mundane objects. In addition, attitudes have the capacity to be stored and retrieved during long periods of time. Emotions can be conditions and have stronger connections with volitions and actions. Attitudes may require additional motivational factors such as desire (Bagozzi et al., 1999) and emotional reactions.

Zajonc (1980) explained that individuals' attitudes, decisions, and behavior are influenced by cognitive and affective systems, but that the cognitive system is slower and more detail-oriented. In contrast, the affective system is faster and cruder. This suggests that the affective system dominates the cognitive system. For example, Burke and Edell (1987) identified that individuals' judgments and evaluations of ads do not capture all of their attitudes towards them and that emotions have a distinctly identifiable, unique, and significant influence on consumer attitudes towards the ad and brand. Negative and positive emotions can co-occur and represent important predictors of the effectiveness of persuasive messages. Therefore, it is important to consider the influence of emotions when studying advertisement effects.

*Affect Event Theory* (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) explains that workplace events affect employees' emotions and induce emotional responses that bring about workplace attitudes and behaviors. "The focus of the theory is on the causes and consequences of affective experiences (Griffith, Connelly, & Thiel, 2014, p.421)" and suggests that affective reactions to events influence attitudes as well as affect-driven and judgment-driven behavior. This suggests that ads represent affective events that are evaluated by individuals and prompt positive or negative emotional responses, which influence individuals' attitudes. Batra and Ray (1986) studied the thoughts and emotions of 120 women when they watched different ads. They found that ads elicited a variety of emotions and that those significantly impacted attitudes towards the brand. Burke and Edell (1987) measured the effect of advertisement on consumers' feelings, to study the power of

feelings in understanding advertising effects. They conducted two studies using university students and showed them TV commercials to assess whether watching these ads induced any emotional responses. They found that emotions explained variance in advertising effects and that positive and negative emotions independently affected individuals' reactions to the ads as well as their attitudes towards the ad and brand. The authors concluded that emotions are generated by the advertisement and occur very quickly (Burke and Edell, 1987).

Hollbrook and Batra (1987) studied a full range of emotional reactions and the mediating role of emotions in consumer responses to ads. Intervening emotional reactions mediate the relationship between advertising content and attitudes towards the ad and brand. Pleasure, arousal, and domination mediated the effects of ad content on attitude towards the ads. The three emotional dimensions plus attitude towards the ads partially mediated the effect of ad content on attitude towards brand. Also, Holbrook and Westwood (1989) identified four primary emotional descriptors (i.e. joy, acceptance/anticipation, fear/sadness), and two dimensions (i.e. negative-positive and serious-light) which represented the emotional responses of individuals watching TV commercials. The authors found that these emotional responses mediated the effect of advertising content on perceived advertisement effectiveness. Moore and Hoenig (1989) investigated the mediating role of emotions on attitude in advertising appeals. A number of non-profit organizations, such as the American Red Cross and the Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse, utilize the role of negative emotions to enhance the persuasive impact on communication appeal and its effect on consumers' attitude. The goal is to persuade viewers to make contributions or donations. The authors examined the conditions under which negative emotions mediated attitudes towards helping and attitudes towards the ad. The research suggests that the effect of negative emotions on attitude towards helping depends on the empathic concern towards the person in need and attention on the needs and feelings of the victim.

Even though this research demonstrates that emotions relate to individuals' attitudes, it is

limited in scope. Controversial advertisement represents a unique phenomenon. According to Waller (2005), controversial ads have a strong emotional effect on viewers and "can elicit reactions of embarrassment, distaste, disgust, offence, or outrage... (p. 7)." For example, Dens et al. (2008) studied the effect of disgusting versus non-disgusting ads on the attitudes (brand and advertisement) of 244 Belgian tour operators. They found that disgusting ads led to a significantly more negative attitude towards the brand and advertisement than non-disgusting ads. Disgusting ads did not lead to better brand recall. Also, individuals with high affect intensity had a stronger negative reaction to the disgusting ads. While research on controversial advertising has studied the impact of this ad strategy on consumers' positive and negative attitudes and purchase intentions, none of these studies have investigated the different emotional responses of consumers and how those emotional responses affect cognitive and affective attitudes or mediate the effect between general beliefs about ads and attitudes towards those ads. In addition, Batra and Ray (1986) suggested that "a wider sample of commercials needs to be studied that includes negatively valenced affective responses (p. 247)." Allen et al. (1988) expressed the sentiment that negative emotion, given its cognitive complexity, may prove to be more difficult to evoke than positive emotion and warrants further investigation.

Individuals who hold a positive general belief toward controversial advertising are more likely to experience positive emotions when watching these ads, which is likely going to relate to a more positive affective and cognitive attitude toward controversial advertising. Individuals who hold a negative general belief toward controversial advertising are more likely to experience negative emotions when watching these ads, which is likely going to relate to a more negative affective and cognitive attitude toward controversial advertising. Figure 1 highlights the role of emotions in the relationship between general beliefs toward controversial advertising and individual attitudes toward controversial attitudes.

**H<sub>3a</sub>:** Individuals' emotions under the condition of stimuli will mediate the relation between general beliefs and



*affective* attitude such that positive emotions will display a positive relation with affective attitude.

**H<sub>3b</sub>:** Individuals' emotions under the condition of stimuli will mediate the relation between general beliefs and *affective* attitude such that negative emotions will display a negative relation with affective attitude.

**H<sub>4a</sub>:** Individuals' emotions under the condition of stimuli will mediate the relation between general beliefs and *cognitive* attitude such that positive emotions will display a positive relation with the cognitive attitude.

**H<sub>4b</sub>:** Individuals' emotions under the condition of stimuli will mediate the relation between general beliefs and *cognitive* attitude such that negative emotions will display a negative relation with the cognitive attitude.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at a private university in the Southeastern United States. A total of 234 students participated in a marketing study, 53% male and 47% female, with a response rate of 94%. Respondents completed part of the survey, including demographics, personal travel behavior, and general beliefs about controversial advertisements, before being presented with a series of controversial ads. The presentation included an 8-minute Spirit Airlines ad series, a mixture of print, web, and video advertisements developed by the airline (see Exhibits 1-7 for samples of print ads). Examples of ads include "Bang Buck", "The Weiner Sale", "Improve your Travel Performance", "No Smoking Sign is Off (in Colorado)", "Go South", "Check out the Oil on our Beaches", "Many Islands Low Fair-MILF", and more. After exposure to the advertisements, respondents completed the remainder of the survey including scales assessing emotions and attitudes resulting from exposure to the ads. The survey took approximately 25 minutes to complete.

The independent variable assessed the general beliefs about controversial advertising of respondents using the *General Belief Survey* based on the Vézina and Paul (1997) 7-item ( $\alpha = .80$ ) scale. Sample items include "Do

provocative ads succeed in attracting the attention of consumers?" and "To what extent do consumers like provocative ads in general?".

The dependent variable assessed respondents' attitude using a modified version of the *Attitude Survey* based on the Vézina and Paul (1997) scale. According to the Hierarchy-of-Effects model, attitude was divided into affective and cognitive states. *The Affective Attitude Scale*, a 2-item ( $\alpha = .85$ ) scale, assessed respondents' preference for and liking of the Spirit Airlines' provocative advertisement. Items include "Did you like the Spirit Airlines' ads?" and "Did you like Spirit Airlines' messages?". *The Cognitive Attitude Scale*, a 4-item ( $\alpha = .85$ ) scale, assessed individuals' thoughts, knowledge, and awareness towards the Spirit Airlines advertisement. Sample items include "Did Spirit Airlines' ads succeed in attracting my attention?" and "Do you remember the content of these advertisements?".

The mediator variable, emotions, was assessed using Burke and Edell's (1987) *Feelings Scale*. Respondents were asked how the advertisements made them feel. *Positive emotions* were assessed using nine items ( $\alpha = .96$ ) including happy, humorous, inspired, interested, joyous, lighthearted, playful, pleased, and satisfied. *Negative emotions* were assessed using five items ( $\alpha = .89$ ) including depressed, disgusted, disinterested, offended, and regretful.

## RESULTS

The hypothesized relationships and model (Figure 1) represent a parallel multiple mediator model (Hayes, 2012) which we studied using the bootstrapping technique proposed by Hayes and colleagues (Hayes, 2012; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). This technique was used to assess the direct effect of General Belief (X) on Attitudes (Y) and the indirect effects via two mediators, positive emotions ( $M_1$ ) and negative emotions ( $M_2$ ). The indirect effect is defined as the product of the two unstandardized paths linking X to Y via a mediator (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

Preacher and Hayes (2008) identified a number of advantages to testing multiple mediation with a single multiple mediation model instead

of separate models. They explained that testing the total indirect effect of X on Y is similar to a regression analysis with several predictors to determine whether an overall effect exists. If an effect is found, then mediation exists. Additionally, a single multiple mediator model allows one to assess what extent the mediators affect the relationship between X and Y. Using a multiple mediation model involves the investigation of the total indirect effects, followed by a hypotheses test regarding individual mediators. Preacher and Hayes (2008) stated that mediation will exist when a predictor affects a dependent variable indirectly through at least one intervening variable or mediator.

Table 1 shows means, standard deviations, scale reliabilities, and correlations for all the variables included in this study.

**General Belief and Affective Attitude**

The results of the analyses are summarized in Table 2.

*The Direct Effect.* The direct effect of X on Y is not significantly different from zero (p = 0.66). There is no evidence that affective attitudes towards the controversial Spirit ads differ as a function of general beliefs about controversial advertising when emotional reactions from the Spirit ads are statistically controlled. Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

**TABLE 1:**  
**Means, Standard Deviations, Scale Reliabilities, and Correlations Among Variables**

<i>Conditions</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
General Belief About Controv. Ads	3.69	.68	(.80)				
Affective Attitude toward Spirit Ads	2.67	1.09	.26**	(.85)			
Cognitive Attitude toward Spirit Ads	3.45	1.14	.32**	.57**	(.85)		
Positive Emotions	2.53	1.08	.17**	.67**	.34**	(.96)	
Negative Emotions	2.28	.93	-.15*	-.52**	-.33**	-.53**	(.89)

N= 234. \*\*p<.01. \*p<.05. (scale reliabilities are noted in parentheses across diagonal)

**TABLE 2:**  
**Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Model Summary Information for the Emotions Influence Parallel Multiple Mediator Model On Affective Attitude**

Antecedent	Coeff.	Consequent										
		M <sub>1</sub> (POS)			M <sub>2</sub> (NEG)			Y (AFFECTIVE)				
		SE	P	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p			
X (BELIEF)	a <sub>1</sub>	0.542	0.101	<.001	a <sub>2</sub>	-0.340	0.095	<.001	c'	0.039	0.089	0.66
M <sub>1</sub> (POS)	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	b <sub>1</sub>	0.582	0.062	<.001	
M <sub>2</sub> (NEG)	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	b <sub>2</sub>	-0.264	0.067	<.001	
Constant	i <sub>M1</sub>	0.476	0.384	<.215	i <sub>M2</sub>	3.54	0.357	<.001	i <sub>Y</sub>	1.685	0.405	<.001
		R <sup>2</sup> = 0.109			R <sup>2</sup> = 0.053			R <sup>2</sup> = 0.479				
		F(1,232) = 28.468, p = <.001			F(1,232)=12.934, p = <.001			F(3,230) = 70.724, p = <.001				

M<sub>1</sub> = 0.476 + 0.542X  
M<sub>2</sub> = 3.54 - 0.340X  
Y = 1.685 + 0.039X + 0.582M<sub>1</sub> - 0.264M<sub>2</sub>

*Indirect Effects.* According to Hayes (2012), inferences about indirect effects should not be based on the statistical significance of the paths that define it "but, rather, on the quantification of the indirect effect itself and a statistical test that respects the non-normality of the sampling distribution of the indirect effect (Hayes, 2012, p. 13)." Using ordinary least squares path analysis, general beliefs about controversial advertising indirectly influence affective attitudes towards Spirit Airlines controversial ads through their effect on positive emotions that result from watching Spirit Airlines ads. As can be seen in Table 2, participants who expressed a general belief that controversial advertising succeeded in attracting the attention of (and was liked by) consumers in general experienced more positive emotions when watching Spirit Airlines ads than those participants who expressed a general belief that controversial advertising did not succeed in attracting the attention of (and was not liked by) consumers in general ( $a_1 = 0.542$ ). Also, participants who experienced stronger positive emotions liked the Spirit advertising more ( $b_1 = 0.582$ ). A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect ( $ab_1 = 0.315$ ) based on 10,000 bootstrap samples was entirely above zero (0.197 to 0.488). There was no evidence that general beliefs about controversial advertising influence affective attitudes towards Spirit Airlines ads independent of their effect on positive emotions ( $c' = 0.039$ ,  $p = .66$ ). This supports hypothesis 3<sub>a</sub>.

Hypothesis 3<sub>b</sub> is also supported. General beliefs about controversial advertising indirectly influence affective attitudes towards Spirit Airlines controversial ads through their effect on negative emotions that result from watching Spirit Airlines ads. As can be seen in Table 2, participants who expressed a general belief that controversial advertising succeeded in attracting the attention of (and was liked by) consumers in general experienced less negative emotions when watching Spirit Airlines ads than those participants who expressed a general belief that controversial advertising did not succeed in attracting the attention of, and was not liked by, consumers in general ( $a_2 = -0.340$ ). Also, participants who experienced stronger negative emotions liked the Spirit advertising less ( $b_2 = -0.264$ ). A bias-corrected bootstrap

confidence interval for the indirect effect ( $ab_2 = 0.090$ ) based on 10,000 bootstrap samples was entirely above zero (0.027 to 0.192). There was no evidence that general beliefs about controversial advertising influences affective attitudes towards Spirit ads independent of their effect on negative emotions ( $c' = 0.0$ ,  $p = .66$ ).

### General Belief and Cognitive Attitude

The results of the analyses are summarized in Table 3.

*The Direct Effect.* The direct effect of X on Y is significantly different from zero ( $p = <.001$ ). Therefore, H<sub>2</sub> is supported and cognitive attitudes towards Spirit Airlines controversial advertising differ as a function of general beliefs about controversial advertising when emotional reactions from Spirit Airlines ads are statistically controlled.

*Indirect Effects.* General beliefs about controversial advertising indirectly influence cognitive attitudes towards Spirit's controversial ads through their effect on positive emotions that result from watching Spirit Airlines ads. As can be seen in Table 3, participants who expressed a general belief that controversial advertising succeeded in attracting the attention of, and was liked by, consumers in general experienced more positive emotions when watching Spirit Airlines ads than those participants who expressed a general belief that controversial advertising did not succeed in attracting the attention of, and was not liked by, consumers in general ( $a_1 = 0.452$ ). Also, participants who experienced stronger positive emotions were more agreeable with the Spirit advertising content ( $b_1 = 0.247$ ). A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect ( $ab_1 = 0.112$ ) based on 10,000 bootstrap samples was entirely above zero (0.032 to 0.231).

Since there was evidence that general beliefs about controversial advertising influences cognitive attitudes towards Spirit Airlines ads independent of its effect on positive emotions ( $c' = 0.437$ ,  $p = <.001$ ), Hypothesis 4<sub>a</sub> is only partially supported.

Finally, general beliefs about controversial advertising did indirectly influence cognitive

**TABLE 3:**  
**Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Model Summary Information**  
**for the Emotions Influence Parallel Multiple Mediator Model for Cognitive Attitude**

Antecedent		Consequent										
		M <sub>1</sub> (POS)			M <sub>2</sub> (NEG)			Y (COGNITIVE)				
		Coeff.	SE	P	Coeff.	SE	p	Coeff.	SE	p		
X (BELIEF)	a <sub>1</sub>	0.452	0.096	<.001	a <sub>2</sub>	-0.214	0.090	.019	c'	0.437	0.105	<.001
M <sub>1</sub> (POS)	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	b <sub>1</sub>	0.247	0.079	.002	
M <sub>2</sub> (NEG)	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	b <sub>2</sub>	-0.210	0.084	.013	
Constant	i <sub>M1</sub>	0.826	0.362	<.023	i <sub>M2</sub>	3.056	0.340	<.001	i <sub>Y</sub>	1.701	0.479	<.001
R <sup>2</sup> = 0.087				R <sup>2</sup> = 0.023				R <sup>2</sup> = 0.224				
F(1,234) = 22.225, p = <.001				F(1,234) = 5.598, p = 0.018				F(3,232) = 22.381, p = <.001				

M<sub>1</sub> = 0.826 + 0.452X

M<sub>2</sub> = 3.056 - 0.214X

Y = 1.701 + 0.437X + 0.247M<sub>1</sub> - 0.210M<sub>2</sub>

attitudes towards Spirit Airlines controversial ads through their effect on positive emotions that result from watching the ads. As can be seen in Table 3, participants who expressed a general belief that controversial advertising succeeded in attracting the attention of (and was liked by) consumers in general experienced less negative emotions when watching the ads than those participants who expressed a general belief that controversial advertising did not succeed in attracting the attention of (and was not liked by) consumers in general (a<sub>2</sub> = -0.214). Participants who experienced stronger negative emotions were less agreeable with the advertising content (b<sub>2</sub> = -0.210). However, a bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect (ab<sub>2</sub> = 0.045) based on 10,000 bootstrap samples included zero (-0.002 to 0.158). Since there was evidence that general beliefs about controversial advertising influences cognitive attitudes towards Spirit Airlines ads independent of its effect on negative emotions (c' = 0.437, p = <.001), Hypothesis 4<sub>b</sub> is only partially supported.

**DISCUSSION**

The primary purpose of advertising is to inform (communicating customer value, building a brand and company image), persuade (building brand preferences,

encouraging switching to a brand) or to remind (maintaining customer relationships, remind them about the product) consumers about a company's brand, products or services. Controversial advertising in particular is used to shock consumers and grab their attention via violating social norms. However, the use of this advertising strategy is rather questionable because it has led to consumer complaints, protests as well as product and brand boycotts (e.g. Curtis, 2002). While some consumers seem to react positively to provocative ads others seem to be disgusted and react negatively to these ads.

This research suggests that the effect of a provocative appeal, displayed by controversial ads, on individuals' liking and acceptance of this appeal is not necessarily a direct one. General beliefs towards advertisements do affect whether individuals will pay attention to those advertisements, remember those messages and agree with the content. However, general beliefs towards advertisements do not directly affect whether individuals will like those ads. In particular, our findings suggest that individuals' beliefs about controversial advertising influence affective attitudes toward these ads via the emotions these ads elicit.

This study found that depending on the general beliefs consumers hold about provocative and

controversial ads, these ads may elicit more positive or negative emotions. These emotions in turn affect whether consumers hold more positive or negative attitudes towards these ads and the product. This suggests that marketers should carefully research the target audience to understand the general beliefs these individuals hold toward controversial advertising. When an audience is characterized by more negative general beliefs toward controversial advertising marketers should avoid using shocking and provocative appeals. Under these circumstances, these appeals are likely going to result in more negative attitudes toward the brand and product. In case the audience holds more positive general beliefs toward controversial ads they are likely to experience positive emotions when viewing these ads. This promotes a more positive attitude toward the ads, product and brand. We suggest that future research should study characteristics of individuals that may cause positive or negative general beliefs toward controversial advertising. For example, it is likely that older people hold more negative beliefs about controversial advertising.

Also, the controversial message intends to make the audience think and be aware of particular social problems and attract audience attention and memory of the message content. Vézina and Paul (1997) stated that awareness and knowledge of advertisement depend on a number of factors, which can be difficult to measure or control. The authors suggest that advertising effectiveness follows a Hierarchy-of-Effect model, which explains that advertisements and persuasive messages impact viewers in different ways, inducing affective attitudes (liking and preferences) and cognitive attitudes (awareness and knowledge). The findings support this model.

Emotions matter in understanding the effectiveness of controversial advertising and provocative messages. This study was able to identify positive and negative emotions as important attributes in determining individuals' cognitive and affective attitudes. The findings suggest that it is important to carefully consider the emotions that these appeals may elicit. Individuals who experience negative emotions from viewing controversial advertisement are more likely to evaluate these messages

negatively, disagree with them and dislike them. However, individuals who experience positive emotions from viewing provocative and controversial advertising are more likely going to agree with their appeal and pay attention to those messages.

As a result, provocative appeals and controversial ads should be carefully developed to induce positive emotions. Moore and Hoenig (1989) proposed that positive emotions may enhance persuasion and negative emotions may reduce persuasion. The findings of this study suggest that Moore and Hoenig are correct and that inducing negative emotions may have significantly negative effects on consumer's attitudes toward the product and brand. When designed to induce positive emotions, those messages augment their positive effect on individuals who are more prone to like those messages and consider them as relevant, valid, and worth their attention. When these messages induce negative emotions, individuals react negatively. They dislike them and avoid the message and appeal; hence, this research suggests that those controversial messages will not have the intended effect and should be avoided.

The influence of controversial and provocative messages seems to depend on the emotional responses they induce. Advertisers and strategists who develop persuasive messages need to be careful when using provocative or controversial appeals. It appears that "shocking" is not always a good strategy and can backfire. In addition, consumers tend to hold positive attitudes towards provocative appeals in general, but may react negatively when facing a specific example of such an advertisement.

Companies employ different advertising strategies including controversial and provocative ads. However, all messages should be consistent with the company's overall vision, strategy and brand image. Individuals have a choice whether to ignore advertising messages or to tune in. Those messages can trigger different types of emotions. Therefore, marketers have to be aware how emotional reactions of consumers affect their attitude towards the product and brand. Individuals which perceived the ads as humorous and funny

can display a positive attitude towards the brand, while negative emotions might have the opposite effect. Marketers need to carefully develop and place controversial ads with a clear understanding of the characteristics and preferences of the target audience. The measurement of advertising effectiveness should determine whether controversial advertising succeeded in achieving marketing objectives. Those measures can include company sales records, recall tests, awareness surveys, and focus groups.

The domestic U.S. airlines do not provide much differentiation in their services, so it is particularly interesting to consider how advertising campaigns may influence consumer attitudes and behaviors. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) 2015 Global Passenger Survey reported that “Brand Perception is Everything” in this industry. The top three factors that impact airline brand perception are on-time performance (75%), aircraft quality and interior (66%) and customer interaction (54%). Three factors influencing ticket purchases on a particular airline include price (43%), schedule and convenient flight time (21%), and frequent flyer program (13%). While brand image including customers attitude towards the airline’s advertising is very important, ticket price and other factual indicators listed above seem to determine consumer decisions and purchases.

### LIMITATIONS

Even though this paper makes numerous contributions, several limitations must be noted and should be addressed in future research. First, the results and interpretations are dependent on, and limited by, the nature of our surveys, respondents, and the advertisements used in this research. Second, all data was collected by means of surveys. Although participants represent individuals from diverse backgrounds and included students and local community members across a wide age range, geographic location, sociocultural status and belief systems, common method variance still exists as a potential concern. We suggest including additional modalities for collecting data, especially on emotions. For example, over the past decade, functional imaging research has begun to offer new insights into the brain

mechanisms underlying emotion regulation (Ochsner et al., 2012).

Another possible limitation is that the results were entirely based on self-reports. Respondents may not adequately identify their emotions or attitudes. Those attitudes and emotions may have been affected by knowledge of the company, the environment in which the study took place, the influence of others around them while participating in the study, and more. Still, self-reports are widely used and present a useful tool for understanding the perceptions individuals form with regard to their values, beliefs, and attitudes. Also, participants were assured anonymity. However, regardless of the significant evidence, which supports the validity of self-reports in general (Spector, 1992), researchers need to be aware of the fact that self-reports are vulnerable to social desirable responding.

### CONCLUSIONS

Individuals’ emotional reactions to the advertisements can be linked to the effectiveness of advertising, specifically to the overall persuasiveness of the ad (Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001). This research adds to the current literature and understanding of the process by which controversial advertisements affect attitudes of individuals towards those messages. Future research should develop this line of research in more depth to study how the attitudes towards controversial advertisements influence purchase decisions and behaviors in particular. In addition, this literature could benefit from longitudinal research to study the effect of advertising strategies on company profitability, reputation, and retention of valuable employees and stakeholders. Furthermore, future research should investigate how provocative appeals compare to other persuasive message techniques and purely informational advertisements across different industries and target markets. It may be that advertisers and strategists spend resources on communication appeals that are highly creative, innovative and costly, such as provocative advertisement, but that these strategies are ultimately not effective and result in more negative than positive effects. Additional mediator variables could be included into the model to better understand the process by

which provocative advertising influences individuals' attitudes and behaviors. For example, personality, cultural background, ethical values, and education seem to be reasonable potential mediators affecting the influence of individuals' general beliefs towards advertising on their attitudes and behaviors.

This study builds upon prior research and extended the focus on emotions and their impact on the belief-attitude relationship related to controversial advertising. In this study, we found that emotions are important variables in this line of research. In addition, we hope that our work will be continued and adds to a prospective line of research studying the process by which provocative communication strategies and controversial advertisement affects individuals and organizations.

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**EXHIBITS 1-7:  
Examples of Spirit Advertising**

**Exhibit 1. Example of Spirit Airlines' Ad Presentation.**



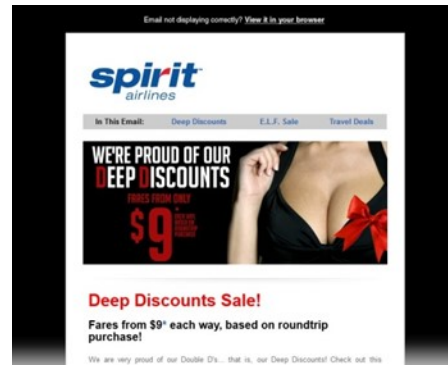
“Spirit Strippermobile Brings Airlines Notoriously Risqué Marketing to the Offline World”. (2011). *NYC Aviation*. Retrieved on November 5, 2017 from <http://www.nycaviation.com/2011/06/spirit-airlines-stripper-mobile-brings-their-notoriously-risque-marketing-to-the-offline-world/16004>.

**Exhibit 2. Response to BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.**



Klint, M. (2010). Spirit Airlines' New Ad Campaign: “Check out the Oil on our Beaches”. *Live and Let's Fly*. Retrieved on November 5, 2017 from <http://liveandletsfly.boardingarea.com/2010/06/24/spirit-airlines-innocent-new-ad-campaign-check-out-the-oil-on-our-beaches/>.

**Exhibit 3. Spirit's Deep Discount Ads**



Fiorillo, V. (2017). “Dear Spirit Airlines: You Are the Worst”. *Philadelphia Magazine*. Retrieved on November 5, 2017 from [://www.phillymag.com/news/2017/06/27/spirit-airlines-worst-airline/](http://www.phillymag.com/news/2017/06/27/spirit-airlines-worst-airline/).

**Exhibit 4. Spirit's CIA Agent Sex Scandal Ads.**



“Spirit Airlines Ad Uses Secret Service Prostitution Scandal To Sell Flights To Colombia”. (2012). *Huffington Post*. Retrieved on November 5, 2017 from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/19/spirit-airlines-uses-secret-service-prostitution-scandal-to-sell-flights\\_n\\_1437748.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/19/spirit-airlines-uses-secret-service-prostitution-scandal-to-sell-flights_n_1437748.html).

**Exhibit 5. Spirit’s Many Islands Low Fair Ad.**



Schoetz, D. (2007). “Airline's 'MILF' Promo Not What You Think”. ABC News. Retrieved on November 5, 2017 from <http://abcnews.go.com/Business/BusinessTravel/story?id=3945773>.

**Exhibit 6. Carlos Danger Ad.**



Costello, C. (2013). Spirit Airlines Released An Ad Featuring Anthony Weiner As A Masked Hot Dog. Business Insider. Retrieved on November 5, 2017 from <http://www.businessinsider.com/spirit-airlines-mocks-anthony-weiner-2013-7>.

**Exhibit 7. Spirit’s Toronto Mayor’s Drug Use Ad.**



Weissman, S. (2013). Spirit Airlines: ‘We’re not Smoking Crack’. *Digiday*. Retrieved on November 5, 2017 from <https://digiday.com/marketing/spirit-airlines-crack-discount/>.