

**SOCIO-POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENTS AND THEIR  
EFFECT ON A BRAND'S SALES AND PUBLIC  
PERCEPTION**

**Honors Thesis**

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## **Abstract**

Over the past few years, many advertisements, from commercials to television, radio, print and digital have had a socio-political or humanitarian aspect to them. Commercials during various Super Bowls have focused on immigration, diversity, overcoming obstacles and more. This study will investigate whether these types of advertisements affect a brand's sales and public perception, be it positively, negatively, neutrally or a combination of these.

My hypothesis states that these advertisements elicit strong emotions from consumers, which in turn impacts a brand's sales and public perception. To test this, I designed and sent out a survey via Facebook showcasing three advertisements: Coca-Cola's "Together is Beautiful" commercial, which aired both during the 2014 Super Bowl and before the 2017 Super Bowl; Oreo's "Pride" social media image, which was released in 2012; and Ram's "Built to Serve" commercial, which aired during the 2018 Super Bowl. The survey included demographic questions as well as questions about each commercial, such as "did you think the commercial was effective?" and "after viewing this image, would you be more willing to buy from this brand?" Results were then examined to see if consumers felt positively, negatively or neutrally towards these advertisements, and whether these emotions affected these brands' sales and public perceptions.

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## **Introduction**

Within the United States' passionate and often divisive political climate, many modern-day advertisements and social media campaigns are choosing to take part and make advertisements that contain political or humanitarian positions. During the 2017 Super Bowl, the most talked about advertisements were in response to political issues. For example, 84 Lumber, a lumber company, almost had their advertisement, which featured a woman and her child trying to cross the Mexican-American border illegally, pulled for being "too political" (Butler & Judkis, 2017). Today, many companies are following suit, whether it be through advertisements on television or by posting ads or images on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc. These advertisements almost feel that they are the new "normal" in our society today. While there will most certainly be more campaigns like these to come, one wonders: how effective are these campaigns? Do people pay attention to them? More importantly, do these socio-political advertisements and types of social media campaigns effect a brand's public perception and sales? My hypothesis is that people have strong emotional reactions to these advertisements, which would affect a brand's sales and public perception either positively or negatively.

## **Literature Review**

Advertisements have been around for hundreds of years. Brands use advertisements to try to get consumers to buy their products, use their services, or to promote brand loyalty. The Super Bowl is one of the biggest stages where brands can advertise themselves and their products or services. Companies spend millions of dollars for a 30-second TV spot. In 2016, the cost for that spot reached a record \$5 million (Syken, 2016). The reason that airtime during commercial breaks costs so much is that

millions of people watch the Super Bowl, either for the game itself or to see what commercials will air. These commercials and advertisements may very well affect consumer behavior: one study shows that movies that air commercials during the Super Bowl have better ticket sales than those that do not (Syken, 2016). Career Builder, an online job search website, claims that its own Super Bowl advertising helped their brand overtake Monster.com as one of the more popular online job search websites (Syken, 2016). While it costs millions of dollars to air these ads during the Super Bowl, brands know there may be a chance that their commercials could affect consumer choices and behavior in their favor.

While there have been some cases of advertising affecting consumer behavior, such as the examples listed above, some industries try to deny that advertising has any effect on consumer behavior. The food industry is one of those industries, mainly because of the obesity epidemic. Some who work in the industry or advertise in the food industry say that their advertising does not influence consumer behavior or why they buy the food they do. The food industry does not want to be linked to the obesity epidemic: however, there has been plenty of research concerning the ways that advertising “influences food preferences, food purchases, consumption behavior, and brand and category sales” (Wymer, 2009). There has also been research that shows that children often choose food-related brands based on the advertisements they have seen (Wymer, 2009). Advertising also increases food purchase requests from children to their parents (Wymer, 2009). Wymer’s (2009) case may be specifically related to food, children, and the obesity epidemic among children in the United States, but it shows that advertising may affect consumer behavior in different ways.

One of the reasons that advertising can affect consumer behavior or consumer choices is due to the role of emotions in advertising, which many socio-political ads use. Marketers, advertisers and brands have been using different emotional approaches for years in their advertising to try and get consumers to buy their products and services. There have been a number of studies that support the vital role that emotion plays in advertising and most of these studies say that emotions “fulfill a crucial role in the advertising process” (Poels and Dewitte, 2006). There has also been research that indicates that “emotions come first and form the basis of rational thinking and behavior” (Poels and Dewitte, 2006). In other words, emotions are at the forefront, and logic and rational thinking often come after or are formed after emotions are considered. If emotions play a role, or form the basis of behavior and rational thinking, then they could realistically affect how a consumer behaves when it comes to different products or services.

Brands often have a difficult time figuring out what “type of emotion” to use in advertisements. Many may want to go straight for positive emotions, such as happiness, love, friendliness, etc. Advertisers may think that having people “feel good” could drive consumers to use their products and services. For some brands, it has worked. For example, Google put out an advertisement showcasing the progression of a “Parisian love” through Google searches, such as translating French phrases and building a baby crib (Rucker, 2017). Cheerios had their “Good Goes Around” campaign, which featured a happy-sounding song and happy-looking people eating Cheerios (Rucker, 2017). These ads used positive emotions well by taking their brands and associating them with these

positive feelings so that consumers felt more positively about buying those products or use those services.

However, brands also may try to use negative emotions. It may seem strange to use emotions such as fear and unhappiness, but “if a brand presents a problem that elicits a negative emotion, and the brand offers the solution, this can persuade consumers to adopt or use a brand” (Rucker, 2017). If a brand takes a negative emotion, such as fear, and offers their product or service as a solution to the problem, then consumers may see the brand as that solution. If a brand that deals with identity theft puts out an ad using negative emotions such as fear and vulnerability, but presents their brand as being the solution to the problem of identity theft, then consumers may gravitate towards that brand (Rucker, 2017). Using negative emotions can go “too far”, though. If consumers feel overwhelmed by negative emotions in advertisements, then they may end up turning away from the brand. For example, Nationwide put out an advertisement showing how a child would never experience the good things about growing up because he died in an accident. The ad was heavily criticized for being too sad, and Nationwide had to put out a statement about the ad (Rucker, 2017). Negative emotions can be used effectively, but consumers do not want to feel overwhelmed by sadness, fear, vulnerability, and anxiousness, so brands need to be careful when they use negative emotions in their advertisements.

Public service announcements (PSAs) have been around for decades and are similar to socio-political advertisements in the fact that they both try to sell a message rather than just a product/service. Many organizations use PSAs to send some sort of message or change the public’s mind on an issue or a cause. However, there are questions

as to whether PSAs are effective or not. Like advertisements, PSAs are trying to persuade, but they are not trying to make people buy a product or use a certain service. Sometimes, however, that persuasion may not be as effective as the organization intended it to be. In 2002, researchers investigated the effectiveness of various antidrug campaigns before they launched. These campaigns focused on the use of heroin, methamphetamines, cocaine, marijuana, and other drugs (Fishbein, Hall-Jamieson, Zimmer, Haeften, & Nabi, 2002). Researchers polled 3,608 students from 10 different schools (Fishbein et al., 2002). Out of 30 PSAs showed, 16 were rated as “significantly more effective in reducing drug use”, and 6 were seen as “significantly less effective” (Fishbein et al., 2002). The PSAs that were considered more effective were the ones that involved more use of realism and negative emotional consequences, and the ones that had a positive emotional response were considered less effective than the former (Fishbein et al., 2002). This goes along with what Rucker (2017) was saying. Negative emotions used in advertising can be seen as a “solution” to a problem.

Public service announcements use a variety of tactics to get people to agree with their message. Some of them are simple and straight-forward – think of the “only you can prevent forest fires” campaign with Smokey the Bear from the U.S. Forest Service that has been around for decades. However, many use a concept called “fear tactics” or “scare tactics”. These tactics are meant to elicit fear within viewers, and are used to scare the viewers into essentially doing the right thing, whether that’s not doing drugs, not drinking and driving, etc. (Ladau, 2015). Some do not agree with these tactics and tend to call them “fear mongering” (Ladau, 2015), but either way, they have been around for years.

The usefulness of “fear tactics” in PSAs has been questioned for years. While the Fishbein et al. (2002) study has shown that the campaigns that showed negative emotional consequences and realism were the more effective PSAs, there are some that believe that fear mongering is just that – fear mongering (Ladau, 2015). One study decided to look at another kind of tactic, which is using “mixed emotions”. Using mixed emotions in PSAs means having a mixture of emotions, such as humor and sadness, to try to evoke some sort of response from the viewer (Myrick & Oliver, 2015). The study investigated a Youtube PSA called “Dear 16-Year-Old Me”, which featured “people telling jokes to their 16-year-old selves and somber tales of regret for dangerous skin-related behaviors, such as tanning or not using sunscreen” (Myrick & Oliver, 2015). Researchers showed groups different edits of the PSA – some as the original, some as more humorous, some that used sadder clips, etc. These researchers wanted to see which PSAs out of the few were more effective in eliciting emotion from the viewers and possibly changing their minds. The results showed that “feeling afraid did increase perceptions of severity and risk” (Myrick & Oliver, 2015). This somewhat supports the use of “scare tactics” in PSAs – if people feel afraid, they may act differently. However, the results also showed that compassion “as an effective response to the video” (Myrick & Oliver, 2015) was strongest in the sadness-only and mixed emotion videos. Feeling compassionate for the individuals in the video also was indirectly related to the viewers having higher intentions to improve their skin health (Myrick & Oliver, 2015). While having sadder videos did elicit compassionate responses, it seems that using mixed-emotion videos can also be an effective tool in PSAs.

As previously mentioned, it can be hard to tell if a PSA will be effective. Like advertisements, PSAs are meant to persuade viewers into changing their minds or informing them of something new. One study by Elder et al. (2004) investigated eight different campaigns that were designed to reduce alcohol-impaired driving (AID) and alcohol-related crashes. Most of these campaigns used some sort of “fear tactic”, such as fear of harming themselves or others, fear of arrest or other legal consequences, or showing drunk drivers as irresponsible (Elder et al., 2004). Results from these campaigns showed that, “under some conditions, well-executed mass media campaigns can contribute to a reduction in AID and alcohol-related crashes” (Elder et al., 2004). For example, a campaign in Victoria, Australia and a campaign in New Zealand that both showed graphic and realistic scenes of car crashes due to AID were associated with a decrease in “injury crashes” (Elder et al., 2004). Although these campaigns did not show concrete evidence that campaigns can reduce AID or other alcohol related crashes, the results did show that these PSAs had beneficial results (Elder et al., 2004). Although there is no direct correlation showing the effectiveness of these campaigns on the public, it is interesting to see how they yielded results that are beneficial to their communities.

While traditional advertisements, such as television, print, and radio are still an important part of marketing, new ways to market have popped up over the last decade or so. One of those new ways to market is to use social media marketing. Social media marketing is exactly as it sounds – brands will post tweets, Instagram posts, or Facebook posts that are related to their brand. Social media marketing has quickly risen in the ranks as an essential part of the marketing plans for various brands and businesses. In 2014, 97% of marketers were currently participating in social media (DeMers, 2014). Ninety-

two percent of marketers also claimed that social media is either important/beneficial to their business, with 80% indicating that their efforts increased traffic towards their brands' website (DeMers, 2014).

Social media marketing provides many different benefits for businesses. Social media marketing costs less than traditional marketing – with researchers saying that 84% of marketers found as “little as six hours of effort per week was enough to generate increased traffic” (DeMers, 2014). Brands can employ social listening when it comes to social media, by tracking comments and seeing how customers respond to their posts (DeMers, 2014). This can provide valuable insight into how consumers view their brand and what they could do to change, if need be. Social media also provides “richer customer experiences” (DeMers, 2014) for consumers. Customers can directly engage with the company and possibly get a quick response, which can improve how a customer feels about the company (DeMers, 2014). Most importantly, using social media can increase brand loyalty. Consumers can easily follow a brand they like, post about how much they like a brand, and possibly convert new customers, which can increase brand loyalty (DeMers, 2014). All these are reasons why brands turn to social media marketing.

Brand loyalty is incredibly important when it comes to retaining consumers. While advertisers have used traditional media such as television, radio and print in the past to help brand loyalty, social media has emerged as another powerful to retain customers. One way advertisers have used social media is to use cause marketing on Twitter, Facebook, etc. Cause marketing “is a promotional partnership of a nonprofit organization and a for-profit corporation that benefits both organizations” (Furlow, 2011). Furlow (2011) believes that brands that partner up with nonprofit organizations

increase or help brand loyalty with the millennial age group. Furlow (2011) states that younger teens and women, who both can fit into the millennial age group, are willing to pay more for products that have a social benefit. These millennials are more likely to trust these companies, seek out employment with them, and want to reward these socially responsible companies by helping with brand loyalty (Furlow, 2011). However, studies have shown that millennials are less trustworthy of traditional advertising, even with brands they respect and trust. Using social media instead in conjunction with cause marketing can establish an emotional connection to the brand (Furlow, 2011), which can help with brand loyalty among these consumers.

Furlow (2011) uses a few different case studies to illustrate her point that social media and cause marketing can help with brand loyalty. One is Target's "Super Love Sender". In 2010, Target featured a Facebook app, "Super Love Sender", "which allowed users to send an interactive Valentine's card and select which one of five preselected charities would receive portion of the Target donation in the process" (Furlow, 2011). Voters did not have to donate: all they had to do select a charity that they believed should get the biggest cut of the \$1 million Target had put aside for this project. In the end, 26,000 votes were cast, and each charity ended up getting a large sum of money (Furlow, 2011). St Jude's received nearly half the votes, and those votes totaled \$490,000 (Furlow, 2011). Target's Facebook page also received 169,000 Facebook likes from the campaign (Furlow, 2011). While this study does not go in depth about whether or not new customers remained loyal, it does show that people tend to gravitate more towards brands with a social cause or cause marketing behind them.

Like traditional advertisements, brands have started to adopt the mentality of relying on or using emotions in their social media marketing. Marketers have realized that consumers buy “with the heart, not the head”, and that emotion triggers engagement on social media (Feldman & Kavilanz, 2018). Instead of using “regular” advertisements to attract consumers to buy their products, brands have started to make emotional posts to try to get consumers to engage with their brand. For example, Canvs, “the industry leader in measuring emotion” (Feldman & Kavilanz, 2018) analyzed all public branded posts in Q4 2017 by two leading categories on Facebook: cultural news and sports publishers (Feldman & Kavilanz, 2018). The results showed that more content didn’t always mean more emotional reactions, except for one outlier: The Bleacher Report, a sports news site that often covers “feel-good” stories, had 20,481 emotional reactions, 154,500 shares, and 274 posts (Feldman & Kavilanz, 2018). For the most part, brands that had more emotional reactions had more total shares (Feldman & Kavilanz, 2018). Canvs also researched Great Big Story, a storytelling company owned by CNN. They found that Great Big Story “delivers more emotional engagement on branded content than industry benchmark”, and that they have five times more shares, three times more emotional reactions, and the top emotions from their posts are “beautiful”, “crazy”, and “sad” (Feldman & Kavilanz, 2018). While this research is limited to Facebook, it does show that using emotions in social media marketing can cause consumers to be more engaged with posts and the brand.

One of the most well-known recent cases of brand producing a socio-political advertisement is Nike’s advertising campaign with Colin Kaepernick. Kaepernick, a former quarterback in the NFL, drew attention, praise and criticism for kneeling during

the national anthem during football games. Nike's first advertisement with Kaepernick featured a black and white close-up of his face, with the text "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything." (Jennings, 2018). Shortly after, Nike released a two-minute long commercial with Kaepernick as narrator that was about athletes who have overcome adversity. Kaepernick's identity as the narrator is not revealed until the end of the commercial (Pasquarelli, 2018).

Both advertisements drew strong emotional reactions from consumers, some positive and some negative. One analysis found that Gen Z, millennials, Gen X and Baby Boomers enjoyed the commercial as it started off, but that interest in the commercial among Boomers began to wane after Kaepernick was revealed to be the narrator (Pasquarelli, 2018). The initial black-and-white advertisement drew a lot of attention. Some people who were against the ad burned their Nike shoes or cut the Nike symbol out of their socks in protest (Jennings, 2018). Nike's shares initially fell more than two percent, but they received more than \$43 million worth of media exposure in the first 24 hours after the advertisement was released (Jennings, 2018). Nike's online sales also rose by 31% (Martinez, 2018). Despite the intense backlash from some critics, research found that the average Nike customer was supportive of the campaign (Jennings, 2018). While this is just one recent case of an advertising campaign being socio-political, it does show it's possible that these types of ads have some effect on a brand's sales and public perception.

One of the advertisements I chose to use in my survey was Coca Cola's "America is Beautiful" commercial. This commercial showed people of different races, ethnicities, religions, etc. who sang the national anthem in different languages, such as Arabic,

Tagalog, Hindi, and English (O'Reilly, 2017). The advertisement was originally aired during the 2014 Super Bowl and was rerun during the pre-game commercials for the 2017 Super Bowl (O'Reilly, 2017). This commercial tried to promote diversity in the United States along with promoting their products. Although there was no information to be found about sales from this commercial, there were a lot of strong emotional reactions on social media. A “#BoycottCoke” hashtag trended on Twitter, with people saying that the anthem should be sung in English only (O'Reilly, 2017). However, people also praised the advertisement for showcasing linguistic diversity in the United States (Lee, 2014). One Twitter user said that Coca-Cola was a “clubhouse leader” and that “the rest must meet the high bar”, meaning other companies should strive to be like Coca-Cola when it comes to their advertisements (O'Reilly, 2017). There does not seem to be much information about whether this changed people's minds or if they view Coca-Cola differently, but it does show that people had strong emotional reactions to the advertisement, both in 2014 and 2017.

The second advertisement I chose for my survey was Oreo's LGBTQ+ Pride cookie. This advertisement was posted on Facebook on June 25th, 2012, one day after the one-year anniversary of same-sex marriage being legalized in New York (Haggin, 2012). The ad featured an Oreo with rainbow-colored stuffing, which represents the LGBTQ+ Pride flag, with the text “June 25th | Pride” underneath it and the caption “Proudly support love!” (Bingham, 2012). Like the Coca-Cola advertisement, there is not much to be said about sales, but this ad did trigger emotional responses from many people. Seventeen hours after the image was posted, the post had 157,000 likes, 40,000 shares, and 20,000 comments (Bingham, 2012). Some people commented that the image was

disgusting, that they were going to unlike the page, and that they would never buy Oreo products again (Griner, 2012). Many supported the image, with one consumer saying, “I didn't think it was possible for me to love Oreo's more than I already did!!” (Griner, 2012). Considering how much engagement the advertisement had, it is clear that while there seems to be no data available sales, this image did affect how people perceived the Oreo brand.

The last advertisement I chose to use in my survey was Ram Trucks’ “Built to Serve” commercial. This commercial featured clips of Americans working together, with Dr. Martin Luther King’s “The Drum Major Incident” sermon overlaying it (Pulliam-Bailey, 2018). The commercial revolves around the definition of greatness, and how anybody can “serve”, with the text “Built to Serve” at the end of the commercial (Pulliam-Bailey, 2018). This commercial is trying to say that anybody can be great, and Ram Trucks can help you be great. However, the commercial received backlash after it aired during the 2018 Super Bowl. Some people thought that it was well-intentioned, but that Ram Trucks did themselves a disservice by releasing the commercial in a hostile political climate (Maheshwari, 2018). Others noted that the full sermon warned people of overspending money on items like cars and discussed why people “are so often taken by advertisers” (Maheshwari, 2018), so people felt it was wrong to have this sermon played. With how negatively this commercial was received, especially on social media, it is reasonable to think that although there are no figures about this commercial affecting sales, it could have affected how people perceive the Ram Trucks brand.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

Participants were not recruited or chosen randomly for this survey. I posted the link to my survey on my Facebook account, so participants of almost all ages, genders, races, and ethnicities could take the survey. The survey was completely anonymous, meaning no one's IP address was shared and people did not have to identify themselves when answering the questions. The survey was also SSL secure, so participants did not have to worry about their information being non-secure. The only people that could not take this survey were people 17 and younger, as the survey required participants to be at least 18 years of age.

### *Procedures*

Once participants clicked on the shared link, they saw information about what the survey was about, what I was hoping to get out of the survey, who to contact, and where to find them if they had any more questions. After participants read this section, they moved onto the survey. The first few questions were general demographics questions, such as "what is your age" and "what is your gender". The next question asked if participants watch the Super Bowl, since many of the advertisements shared were aired during the Super Bowl. The following two questions asked if they had noticed a change in commercials/advertisements with regards to their socio-political undertones, and if they noticed whether they like these commercials or not as a result.

Following those questions, I asked participants to view the Coca-Cola "America is Beautiful" commercial and respond whether they had seen this commercial or not. The survey then asked if they had a positive, negative, or neutral response to the commercial, and to briefly explain their opinion on the commercial. After answering these two questions, I asked if they viewed Coca-Cola differently, with the answers "yes", "no,"

and “somewhat” as available options. I then asked participants if they would buy Coca-Cola products after seeing this commercial, to which they could answer “yes” or “no”. After participants answered this set of questions, I asked them the same set of questions for the Oreo LGTQ+ Pride advertisement. Once they finished that set of questions, the survey asked participants to answer the same questions about Ram Trucks’ “Built to Serve” commercial. Once they finished all 20 questions, they submitted the survey for the results to be analyzed.

## **Results**

On February 11, 2019, I posted my survey to my Facebook page. Over the course of several weeks, I posted the link to the survey on my page and to various groups that I am a part of. In total, I received 35 responses to the survey with a 100% completion rate. The survey took an average of about five minutes and 20 seconds for participants to complete.

For the first question, “What is your age?”, every participant responded. The majority of those who participated in my survey were between the ages of 18-25, with 15 people responding, meaning that they represented 42.86% of all respondents. However, 14 people responded that they were 50+, meaning they represented 40.00% of all respondents. With the rest of the options for participants to choose from, three people, or 8.57%, responded that they were 26-33 years old; two people, or 5.71%, responded that they were 34-41 years old; and one person, or 2.86%, responded that they were 42-49 years old. For this survey, the majority of those who participated were either 18-25 years old or 50+ years old.

The second question, “What is your gender?” had a less diverse set of answers. The majority of those who participated in the survey were female: 26 out of 35 participants, or 74.29%, identified as female. Nine out of 35 participants, or 25.71%, identified as male. No participants identified themselves as non-binary, and no participants said that they preferred not to answer this question.

The third question in my survey, which was “Do you watch the Super Bowl?”, did not have an even split. The majority answered that they do watch the Super Bowl, with a total of 30 out of 35 participants, or 85.71%. Only five participants, or 14.29%, chose “no”. The fourth question had an even larger disparity. The question asked whether or not participants had noticed a change in the content of commercials, such as advertisements having more humanitarian/political/socio-political undertones. The majority, with 33 out of 35 responding, or 94.29%, answered yes. Two participants, or 5.71%, answered no. Question number five was a follow-up to question four: it asked if participants had seen these advertisements and if so did they like them? The majority, 22 out of 35, or 62.86%, answered that it depended on the specific commercial/advertisement. Eleven participants, or 31.46%, answered yes, they enjoyed the advertisements; one participant, or 2.86%, answered no, they did not enjoy the advertisements; and one participant, or 2.86%, answered that they had not seen any of these commercials/advertisements.

The next five questions revolved around Coca-Cola’s “America is Beautiful” commercial. The first question asked if they had seen it prior to taking this survey: 16 participants, or 45.71%, answered yes, and 19, or 54.29%, answered no. Question seven asked if they had a positive, negative, or neutral response to the commercial. Twenty-five out of 35 participants, or 71.43%, answered that they had a positive response. Four out of

35 participants, or 11.43%, replied that they had a negative response. Six out of 35 participants, or 17.14%, answered that they a neutral response to the commercial.

Question eight asked participants to briefly explain their opinion of the advertisement. Thirty-one out of 35 participants answered this question. From looking at the responses, many said that it was a well-done ad that showcased the diversity of the United States and that diversity should be celebrated. Some did not like the Coca-Cola ad for a few reasons. One recipient said they do not like politics in their soda brands, while another said they believe it takes away meaning from the song. Three respondents shared similar ideas that although the message was nice, they felt that the corporation was trying to “capitalize the current progressive climate” or that they did not care about the issue, they were just trying to “make a few bucks”. Overall, the reception to the advertisement was either positive or neutral.

The following two questions asked participants about the Coca-Cola brand specifically. The first asked if participants viewed Coca-Cola differently after seeing this commercial. One person skipped this question. One person, or 2.94% of those who answered, answered yes, they viewed Coca-Cola differently. The majority answered no, with 24 out of 35, or 70.59%, responding that they did not view Coca-Cola differently. Nine participants, or 26.47%, answered that they somewhat viewed Coca-Cola differently after viewing this commercial. The last question asked participants if they would buy Coca-Cola products after seeing this specific commercial. Twenty-two participants, or 64.71% of those surveyed, answered yes, they would buy Coca-Cola products after viewing this commercial. Twelve participants, or 35.29% of those surveyed, responded no, they would not buy Coca-Cola products after viewing this commercial.

The next set of questions focused on the Oreo Pride advertisement that was posted on social media. The first question asked if participants had seen the advertisement before: nine, or 25.71%, answered yes, and 26, or 74.29%, answered no. The next question asked if they had a positive, negative or neutral response to the ad. The majority answered that they had a positive response: 20 participants, 57.14%, clicked “positive”. Ten participants, or 28.57%, had a neutral response to the ad, and five participants, or 14.29%, had a negative response to the ad. Like the Coca-Cola set of questions, I asked participants to briefly explain their opinion of the ad. The majority seemed to enjoy the ad and liked that Oreo was supporting LGBTQ+ people. Like the similar question with Coca-Cola, there were some people who questioned the integrity of the ad or if Oreo was doing anything else to support LGBTQ+ people. Unlike the Coca-Cola advertisement, this Oreo ad received more comments about the ad not affecting them. Some participants said that they enjoyed the ad but that it did not affect them that much.

The last two questions asked if participants viewed Oreo differently after seeing this ad and if they would buy Oreo products after viewing this ad. The first question had 17 participants, or 50%, answer no, it did not make them view Oreo differently. Six participants, or 17.65%, answered yes, and 11 participants, or 32.35%, answered somewhat: one participant skipped this question. The last question had a majority of participants answered yes, they would buy Oreo products after viewing this commercial: 25 participants, or 75.76%, clicked “yes”. Eight participants, or 24.24%, answered no: two participants skipped this question.

The last set of questions asked participants to view Ram Trucks’ “Built to Serve” commercial. A slight majority – 21 participants, or 60% – answered that they had not

seen this commercial, while 14 participants, or 40%, answered that they had seen the commercial. There was no large majority for the question that asked if participants had a positive, negative or neutral response to the commercial. Fourteen participants, or 40% of those who answered, said they had a neutral response; 12 participants, or 34.29% of those who answered, claimed they had a positive response; and nine participants, or 25.71%, answered that they had a negative response. The responses to this commercial were more varied than the previous, similar questions. Some called it inspirational and liked that it highlighted “every-day heroism” in America. Many participants were confused about the usage of Martin Luther King Jr. Many did not see the correlation between the message Ram Trucks was trying to convey, or thought that it felt forced. Some did not like the fact that Ram Trucks used a “social justice icon” to sell trucks. The results for this question were much more divisive than previous questions.

The last two questions asked if participants viewed Ram Trucks differently now or if they would buy their products after seeing this commercial. For the first question, the majority chose no: 22 participants, or 62.86% of those who answered, said it did not change their view of Ram Trucks. Seven participants, or 20%, answered yes, and six participants, or 17.14%, answered somewhat. The last question had a majority that answered no, with 27 out of 35 participants, or 77.14%, choosing that answer. That left eight participants, or 22.86%, answering yes, they would buy Ram Trucks products after viewing this commercial.

## **Discussion**

Some of the results, especially the first few questions, were not surprising once all the results were in. I had posted the survey to my Facebook page, along with a few

Facebook groups, such as the “Salem State Class of 2019” page and the “Salem State Honors Program” page. Many of the people in my friends list and on the pages listed are between the ages of 18-25, so it was not a surprise to see that the 18-25 years old answer was picked the most. I also posted a link to the survey on a group called “Everything Weymouth”, which is a group for my hometown. From my observations, many of the people in that group are in their 50s or above. With that in mind, it makes sense that the next largest group of participants was 50 and above. It also did not surprise me that a large majority of the respondents were female, considering most of my Facebook friends are female, and from my own observations, the the Facebook groups listed are primarily female.

The answers to the sets of questions revolving around the three advertisements were a little surprising to me, however. Slightly more than half (19 out of 35 participants) said they had not seen the Coca-Cola commercial, which was somewhat unexpected since this commercial had aired during the Super Bowl, and 33 out of 35 respondents said that they watch the Super Bowl. Most participants answered that they had a positive reaction to the question that asked if they had a positive, negative or neutral response to the Coca-Cola ad. Some of the responses in the question that asked them to explain their opinion on the commercial indicated some strong emotional responses. Even with seemingly strong emotional reactions, the following questions that asked if they viewed Coca-Cola differently or would buy their products in the future do not entirely reflect that. The majority (24 out of 35 respondents) answered that it did not change their view on the Coca-Cola brand. Twenty-two respondents said they would buy Coca-Cola products after viewing this commercial, which is a majority, but not a large one. The contrast between

some of the responses and what people clicked in the last two questions is interesting to consider.

The questions that revolved around the Oreo Pride cookie had slightly different results. The majority had positive responses to the advertisement, but more people said that they felt neutral about the ad than the previous ad: six participants answered that they felt neutral towards the Coca-Cola ad, while ten answered that they felt neutral towards the Oreo ad. The written responses reflect this: there were more responses that said the advertisement did not affect them. The neutrality towards this commercial is evident in at least one of the following questions. While the majority said they did not view Oreo differently after this commercial, participants viewing Oreo somewhat differently were not too far behind, with eleven participants choosing that answer. The last question is interesting when compared to the Coca-Cola commercial, more people would buy Oreo products after viewing the Pride advertisement. Twenty-five answered that they would buy Oreo products, compared to the 22 that said they would buy Coca-Cola products.

The response to the Ram Trucks “Built to Serve” commercial surprised me the most. Participants’ responses were much more spread out than I believed they would be. While the majority had a neutral response, those who had a negative or positive response to the commercial weren’t far behind. The written responses were just as varied. Like the previous questions, people had positive and negative responses to the commercial. It seemed that some participants had some strong emotional reactions to this commercial, at least in their written responses. However, most participants said this ad did not change their view of Ram Trucks: with how strong some of the responses that were either in favor or against the ad, more “yes” answers were expected. Interestingly enough, the last

question does somewhat reflect the strong emotional responses: for the first time, the majority answered no, they would not buy Ram Trucks after seeing this commercial.

It is interesting to see the differences between the answers for the questions “Do you view [brand] differently after seeing this commercial?” and “Would you buy [brand] products after seeing this commercial?” Per my hypothesis, I believed that people’s strong emotional reactions would affect the brand’s sales and public perception. For the most part, these commercials and advertisements did not affect how people saw the brand. Even with some of the participants having stronger emotional reactions that are evident in their written responses, or having a positive or negative response, people still mainly said that these advertisements did not affect how they viewed the brand. However, people felt more strongly about whether they would buy these brands’ products after viewing these advertisements. Each question had either a semi-large or large majority that chose one of the two answers: there were no cases of 50% choosing yes and 50% choosing no. With the current political/socio-political climate today, I had originally expected more participants to answer that these commercials and advertisements did affect how they viewed the brand, but for the most part, they didn’t.

There could be a few reasons for this. From what has been observed, most of the people who took this survey were from Massachusetts or the New England area. Although some are hesitant to call themselves liberals, many voters from Massachusetts “consistently side with left-leaning policies over more conservative ones” (O’Sullivan, 2014). Many of the participants were also between 18-25, and that age group, along with younger voters, “have distinctly more liberal views than older voters” (Chait, 2018). People that are more liberal, both young and old, may have strong emotional responses to

the socio-political advertisements, but since they already believe in what an advertisement is saying, they may not view the brand differently. They may be more willing to support the brand financially, though, since the company is supporting the causes they believe in.

This could also explain the somewhat neutral responses to the Oreo advertisement. On May 17, 2004, Massachusetts legalized same-sex marriage. Massachusetts was the first state in the United States to legalize same-sex marriage (Loft, 2016). Since it has been almost fifteen years since same-sex marriage was legalized in the state, people may not feel as strongly about pride in general because it's been legalized for "so long" here. Participants may feel that is more the "norm" here, so while some may have strong emotional responses and may be more willing to buy Oreo products, others may not be affected by the ad. With this in mind, it could possibly explain why some participants said that they weren't affected by the Oreo ad that much.

If this research was to be done again, there would be a few changes I would make to try to get clearer results. The first change would be to try to get more diverse demographics. As previously mentioned, most participants were female and between the ages of 18-25 or 50+. Most were also probably from the Massachusetts or New England area. If I were to do another study like this, I would want more males, non-binary people and people between the ages of 26-49 to take the survey. I would also want more people from outside the New England region to take this survey. To do that, I could send out the survey on other social media sites, like Twitter and Tumblr, to see if more people from around the United States, or even the world, could take the survey. I would also ask

people between the ages of 26-49 to share the survey with their friends or loved ones so more people in that age group could take the survey.

Another change that could be considered is some of the answers in the questions. As previously stated, participants could choose whether they had a positive, negative or neutral response to the different advertisements. It was originally thought that choosing “positive” or “negative” and writing their thoughts down would indicate if they had strong emotional responses to these advertisements. While that was true in some cases, it wasn’t true in every case. If this research was going to be done again, I would have the options read, “positive”, “slightly positive,” “neutral”, “slightly negative”, and “negative.” Having “slightly positive” and “slightly negative” along with “neutral” could indicate less strong emotional responses than choosing “positive” or “negative”. I would also have participants say what answer they chose along with their opinions on the advertisement. For example, a participant that chose “neutral” would say that they chose the “neutral” response and would then explain their thoughts. I could connect the opinions along with whether they had a positive, negative or neutral response and I could see if they had a strong emotional reaction to the advertisements.

## **Conclusions**

Companies and corporations seem to be trying more than ever to connect with consumers in new ways. One of these new ways is putting out socio-political advertisements either as a statement or to show support for a specific cause. Do these ads affect a brand’s sales and public perception, however? My hypothesis stated that people have strong emotional reactions to these ads, which affects a brand’s sales and public perception.

After I sent out survey that featured three different advertisements, I asked whether they had a positive, negative or neutral response to each one, asked participants to briefly explain their opinions, and asked if they view the brands differently or would buy products from these brands. The results were mixed. While there were indications of strong emotional reactions, both in the question that asked for their response and to explain their opinions, many participants said that they did not view these brands differently, but those ads did affect if they would be more willing to buy the brands' products. Although brands have used cause marketing before, this strategy of using socio-political ads is somewhat new, so more research can and should be done on the subject.

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