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Management from the Nova School of Business and Economics.

**THE POWER OF CONTROVERSY: EXAMINING ITS LINKS TO PERSONAL
CONTROL AND WORD-OF-MOUTH**

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationships between personal control, controversy and word-of-mouth. It is hypothesized that individuals with low (vs high) control engage more in word-of-mouth in a controversial topic. An experimental study manipulated controversy but did not support the hypothesis of individuals engaging in word-of-mouth in controversial topics to compensate for low feelings of control. Nonetheless, there are relevant insights to this study, particularly on the relationship between controversy and word-of-mouth. Findings support the idea that controversy increases all the tested types of word-of-mouth, which was an unexpected result.

Keywords: control, compensatory consumption, controversy, word-of-mouth.

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1. Introduction

In a world where social media are increasingly more used and influences people's lives and decisions, brands have been trying to gather attention and create buzz. Getting involved on social issues and controversial topics might create more buzz for brands, however previous research does not clearly predict whether this would be the case. Benetton's advertisement campaigns provide a good illustration of that. In fact, the brand is known for its controversial campaigns, focused on subjects such as death, religion, homosexuality, racism, AIDS (Duffy 2017). The approach was both successful and problematic, but the controversial advertisement campaign process is considered to be effective, iconic and recognized all over the world by consumers and marketers (Barela 2003). The same study mentions that the controversial campaigns started when Benetton hired photographer Oliviero Toscani, who had the purpose of starting discussion, bringing awareness and supporting worldwide social issues through advertisements. The strategy captured media's and people's attention while challenging their beliefs, causing mixed reviews: while some reported that it stopped them from purchasing on Benetton, others praised the brand's messages (Barela 2003). But the truth is that the Benetton's sales grew 20 times during the time when Toscani was there (Lyman 2001).

Benetton, as well as other brands, show that controversy causes conversation and attracts attention to their advertisements. However, its effect is not always clear, and it may backlash and hurt the brand. For that reason, in light of controversy, it is crucial for companies to understand what drives consumer behavior and what attracts them to a particular product or brand. In this case, given how controversy sparks up conversation, this study will focus on a particular consumer behavior: word-of-mouth (WOM). WOM has been an important behavior to companies, having a great influence on consumer decisions (Bughin, Doogan, and Vetvik 2010). Being WOM of such importance, questions on how it is affected by other variables have not been yet fully answered. In this case, the goal is to study how controversy and personal

control interact with it. Control is of central importance in human behavior (Inesi et al. 2011), and many decisions are influenced by the desire to acquire or restore. Control influences consumer behavior and has been studied in the light of compensatory consumption theory (Rucker and Galinsky 2013). Previous literature supported and proposed the idea of compensatory WOM, pointing towards the conclusion that WOM can be used as a means of restoring control (Consiglio, de Angelis and Costabile 2018). However, there is also literature pointing towards the idea that the opposite would occur, since powerful people – and therefore, people with more control (Keltner, Gruenfeld and Anderson 2003; Magee and Galinsky 2008; Rucker, Galinsky and Dubois 2011) – are more disinhibited (Anderson and Berdahl 2002; Anderson and Galinsky 2006), which should make them more likely to share. This study will evaluate deeper these opposing views, exploring the relations between control, power, controversy and WOM.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Controversy

In this research, I define controversy as a discussion that deeply divides people, since they will have strong opinions on the subjects involved (Chen and Berger 2013). In that sense, controversy is polarizing and heats up conversations. For that reason, brands that get involved on a controversial topic might also divide opinions and be perceived differently because of that. By taking a stand on these topics, the brand can be considered politically incorrect, but more authentic due to that (Rosenblum, Schroeder and Gino 2020), as well as having higher status and autonomy because of their nonconforming behavior (Bellezza, Gino and Keinan 2014). To have nonconforming behavior is riskier than following the norm, since those actions will not please certain consumers that are predicted to strongly disagree with the brand's position. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that these brands can be perceived as risk-takers. The mentioned attributes are associated with brand leaders - which have status and autonomy, so

they can afford to take the risk of getting involved in a controversial topic. Therefore, the following hypothesis will be confirmed:

H1A: controversial (vs non-controversial) brands are perceived as more powerful.

H1B: controversial (vs non-controversial) brands are perceived as more influential.

H1C: controversial (vs non-controversial) brands are perceived as more autonomous.

H1D: controversial (vs non-controversial) brands are perceived as more risk-takers.

H1E: controversial (vs non-controversial) brands are perceived as brand leaders.

In turn, brand leaders are regarded as high agency entities – being able to influence over outcomes – meaning that associating with them might restore feelings of control (Beck, Rahinel and Bleier 2019). As such, it is theorized that individuals with lower sense of control would affiliate with these brands to restore their sense of control. This in line with the compensatory consumption theory, that states that consumers buy a certain product that signals what they are missing (Rucker and Galinsky 2013). But people might affiliate with brands in ways other than purchasing and display other behaviors. This study will focus on a specific consumer behavior: word-of-mouth (WOM). Therefore, it is hypothesized that people with lower control will affiliate with controversial brands through WOM:

H2: individuals with low (vs high) control will engage in WOM related with controversial brands.

2.2 Word-Of-Mouth

WOM can be broadly defined as “informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services, and/or their sellers” (Westbrook 1987). WOM is an increasingly significant behavior which affects purchasing decisions up to 50% (Bughin, Doogan, and Vetvik 2010) and gained power with the raise of technology and internet access, since it can occur offline, face-to-face, or online making use, for example, social media.

Chen and Berger (2013) show that controversial topics can simultaneously cause interest and discomfort. Thus, high controversy does not always increase conversation, since that is dependent on who are the recipients of the message. If the conversation is between friends, the interest factor surpasses the discomfort factor, so higher levels of controversy increase the likelihood of conversation. However, if the conversation is between strangers, the discomfort generated is higher than the interest caused by the controversial topic, meaning that even moderate levels of controversy do not to increase the likelihood of conversation. For that reason, this study will include different types of WOM, public and private, to account for such differences in comfort. Previous studies also showed that the communication channel used influences sharing extreme opinions on controversial topics and found that participants are more likely to share those opinions via email than in a post on social media, since that might lead to social disapproval (Tassiello et al. 2016). From these studies, I hypothesize:

H3A: *controversial (vs non-controversial) brands will lead to more conversation in more private ways of WOM.*

H3B: *controversial (vs non-controversial) brands will decrease conversation in more public ways of WOM.*

2.3 Power, Control and Agentic Orientation

Power has been previously defined as “asymmetric control over valued resources in social relations” (Keltner, Gruenfeld and Anderson 2003; Magee and Galinsky 2008; Rucker, Galinsky and Dubois 2011). The relation between power and control is, therefore, crucial in this study, since when brands are referred to as powerful, they can also be considered as having more control. Hence, a powerful brand or individual has, by definition, more control compared to another. In fact, power, as well as choice, can be used to restore control and are interchangeable in doing so, since power satisfies the desire for choice, and choice satisfies the desire for power, given that each restores feelings of control (Inesi et al. 2011). The study

showed that the need for control can be fulfilled through power. Since power is a way of reaching control – and control is described in the study as a central force in human behavior – this study will focus on control but will consider power and control as interchangeable.

It has been studied that powerful people, due to having agentic orientations, tend to intentionally deviate from others (Mourali and Yang 2013). In that sense, powerful people are motivated to oppose the social consensus, since they seek self-enhancement via divergence while powerless people seek self-enhancement via conformity, driving them to conform to the social consensus (Wu et al. 2016). The same study found that this self-enhancement motivations push consumers' electronic WOM (eWOM) behaviors and explain other effect confirmed by the authors: powerful (vs. powerless) people are more likely to post online reviews about service experiences that are incongruent with the forum consensus, while powerless (vs. powerful) are more likely to post congruent reviews. Building on this theory, being a controversial topic divisive and not consensual, and making a parallel between posting online reviews and the WOM behaviors being studied in this report, this would indicate that powerful people, given a certain controversial topic, would tend to indulge more on WOM. Pursuing self-enhancement, powerful individuals might be more drawn to interact with a controversial topic when compared to a powerless individual, who would prefer to follow the social norm and achieve consensus, indicating that he would prefer not to get involved in a divisive topic.

Consistent with the previously explained theory, research has shown evidence that high power leads to disinhibited behavior and attention to rewards (Anderson and Berdahl 2002; Anderson and Galinsky 2006). Power reduces loss aversion, since individuals are less concerned with the negative consequences of their actions (Inesi 2010) and powerful people are more risk-seeking when compared to powerless individuals (Anderson and Galinsky, 2006), indicating that the powerless would be more risk-averse, making them less prone to share their opinion on a divisive topic. Low power leads to inhibition and constrained behavior (Keltner,

Gruenfeld and Anderson 2003), suggesting that the powerful would more easily share their opinions on a divisive topic, since they are more disinhibited, while powerless individuals would feel more constrained to do so.

2.4 Control and WOM

Consiglio, de Angelis and Costabile (2018) found that people in urban density settings - which are associated with a lower sense of personal control - are more likely to share information with others. In that case, lower personal control would encourage information sharing, being compensatory WOM the reason for doing so. But how it would interact with a controversial topic has not been studied yet.

Taking all WOM effects into account, there might be opposite forces influencing these behaviors. Less control would point towards a higher affiliation with a brand taking a stand on a controversial topic as a means of restoring control but doing so might cause discomfort due to the particularities of WOM. Besides, prior literature reports an increase of WOM in low control settings (Consiglio, de Angelis and Costabile 2018), while other might suggest that people with higher control are more prone to engaging in WOM due to, for instance, being more disinhibited (Anderson and Berdahl 2002; Anderson and Galinsky 2006). Thus, this study's purpose is to close the literature gap on WOM, controversy and personal control.

As explained before, in the current times, WOM is entangled with digital transformation. Therefore, this study will focus on digital WOM behaviors of a specific platform, Instagram. Instagram has 1 billion users and became an important platform worldwide being especially popular among the ages 18–29 years old (WordStream 2019). The social media platform has many features that can be used to analyze participant's levels of public or private WOM. *Following* a page, *commenting* on the page, *sharing* through a private message and *sharing* through the feature Instagram *stories* - sharing content with followers that stays visible for 24 hours - are different ways of WOM with more or less exposure.

3. Methodology

The goal of this study is to test the hypothesis that people with lower control engage more in WOM in controversial topics. Brand perceptions of controversial brands will also be tested, as well as the overall increase of WOM in controversial (vs non-controversial) topics.

In order to conduct the study, I created a fictional brand, *Scents*. Thus, individuals will not be influenced by previous perceptions that they might have had if a real brand was used, which allows to isolate controversy's effect. As such, participants did not receive much information on the brand besides a presented commercial on a controversial or non-controversial topic.

The controversial topic chosen relates to the LGBTQ+ community, in particular their right to marry and adopt. While the LGBTQ+ community strives for equal rights, same-sex parenting faces negative or ambivalent attitudes and these couples are denied adoption rights in many countries, including European ones (Yerkes, Dotti Sani and Solera 2018). Other study mentions that, in spite of evidence pointing the opposite, some people believe that same-sex parents are incompetent and perceive same-sex parenting as “unnatural” (Pacilli et al. 2017). Therefore, this is still a controversial topic since there are people who strongly oppose this, and others who strongly support the cause. Please note that in this study, I am not endorsing these views and the LGBTQ+ scenario is being defined as controversial simply based on the definition that some people strongly support this, and others strongly oppose this. Following this rationale, the controversial scenario features a same-sex couple, and the non-controversial a heterosexual couple, both of the couples having a child.

Besides manipulating controversy, the main character also has a different gender between scenarios, to account for differences in gender roles perceptions. Previous studies have pointed towards differences in discrimination towards non-heterosexual men and non-heterosexual women. For instance, it was studied that attitudes tend to be more hostile toward

gay men than lesbians (Herek 2002). Thus, participants will either see Emily or John – fictitious names used to avoid pronoun confusion, since same-sex couples are being used.

As explained before, the dependent variable of the study is WOM, and the independent variables are controversy and control. Most of the behaviors are related to eWOM, in particular using the Instagram platform. This platform allows to evaluate different levels of public exposure due to its features. *Following* a company's page is a way of supporting it and, although it might be visible, it is not likely to get direct exposure to others. On the other hand, posting a positive *comment* in the brand's page would be a more active and publicly exposed way of endorsing such support and participating in a conversation. Sending it to a friend in the platform but through *private message* is a way of WOM with little exposure, which can be used by people might not have the courage to do so publicly. Behaviors such as *sharing* the commercial on Instagram stories would be more exposed, since this would be aimed at the individuals' followers to see during a period of time. The answers to these different behaviors will allow for conclusions in terms of the interest of sharing when more or less exposure is enabled. So, an individual might want to share, but be afraid of the consequences, and therefore still share but in a private manner. This would allow to check if individuals with less control actually share more, but through other methods. Regarding other WOM that do not necessarily need a platform to do so, there are questions on mentioning to friends/family/colleagues/new acquaintances. Again, different people imply different levels of comfort in discussing such topics. A total interpersonal WOM index was calculated by using all of the different recipients of the message.

The participant's sense of control was measured using a scale (Lachman and Weaver 1998). Individuals were randomly assigned to answer these questions either before reading the scenarios, or after answering the questions about WOM and brand perceptions that followed the scenarios. The rationale behind this is to test if the order of the questions influences the

outcome of the answers – in the sense that those who answer it before are more likely to have their sense of control in mind at that time.

Stimuli and questionnaire were designed on Qualtrics. It was distributed to and completed by my personal contacts online via an anonymous Qualtrics link.

4. Procedure

A convenience sample of 379 individuals with an Instagram account participated in this study online on a voluntary basis. Answers were not forced, thus missing values were excluded pairwise. This is a 2 (controversy: yes vs. no) x 2 (gender: male vs. female) between-subjects study, and participants were randomly assigned to see one of the four possible scenarios (questionnaire on Annex 1). After reading one of the scenarios, participants answered questions on WOM behaviors – *following, sharing* through Instagram stories, leaving a *positive comment* on the page, *sending in a private message* to a friend, and *mentioning* the commercial to different people. The questions were answered using a 7-point scale (1- Extremely uninterested/unlikely; 7- Extremely interested/likely). Subsequently, to test if the brand in the controversial scenario is indeed signaling the aforementioned attributes, questions to determine *power, autonomy, risk taking, and influence* were made. Additionally, to ensure that the controversy manipulation was successful, participants answered to what extent they think that the advertising will cause *opposing views, discomfort*, will *divide* people and if people will have *strong opinions* about the ad. All of these questions were answered using a 7-point scale (1- Strongly disagree; 7-Strongly agree). The participant's sense of control was measured using a scale composed by 12 questions (Lachman and Weaver 1998) on 7-point scale (1- Strongly disagree; 7-Strongly agree), either before the scenario, or after the questions on brand perceptions. Participants were also asked to indicate, on average, how much time they spend on Instagram daily and how likely they are, in general, to discuss LGBTQ+ rights with different people and on social media. Individual's *opinion* on the LGBTQ+ marriage and adoption rights,

personal involvement and how *important* the cause is to them was measured on a 7-point scale to check participant's alignment with the brand's positioning.

5. Analysis

Normality tests were performed, and most variables do not approach a normal distribution (Annex 3). However, because of the Central Limit Theorem ($n > 30$), and because I am using tests that are robust to violations of normality, the tests performed below are valid.

5.1 Reliability of Measures

Since many variables used multiple-item scales, their reliability needs to be evaluated. All the variables were reliable: personal control scale ($\alpha = 0,797$), perception of controversy ($\alpha = 0,884$), influence ($\alpha = 0,914$), autonomy ($\alpha = 0,806$), risk-taking ($\alpha = 0,751$), brand leadership ($\alpha = 0,811$). The scale of brand power is not reliable ($\alpha = 0,530$). Nonetheless, since this was based on an existing measure (Anderson and Galinsky, 2006), I averaged all items to form an index to be used in the analyses below. When needed, questions were properly reverse scored.

5.2 Manipulation check of controversy

In line with the definition of controversy used in this study, a scale was created to evaluate how participants perceived controversy in the ad. Thus, the aforementioned corresponding questions - on whether the ad will cause *opposing views*, *discomfort*, will *divide* people and if people will have *strong opinions* about it – were summed and average to conduct a manipulation check of controversy. An independent sample t-test was used to confirm the significance in the mean difference of the perception of controversy in the controversial and non-controversial scenarios. The controversial scenarios were successfully perceived as more controversial ($t(251) = 9,947$; $p = 0,000$; $M_c = 5,131$; $SD_c = 1,030$; $M_{nc} = 3,527$; $SD_{nc} = 1,485$). Even though the topic is controversial, most participants supported the brand's position ($M = 5,82$; $SD = 1,6314$). 50.8% of the participants strongly agreed that LGBTQ+ people should have the right to marry and adopt and 79.9% at least somewhat agreed (Annex 4).

5.3 Dependent variables

Follow: An independent samples t-test was performed to test the mean differences between the controversial and non-controversial scenarios and the results were significant ($t(283)=3,179$; $p=0,002$). Participants would follow more the brand in the controversial (vs non-controversial) scenario ($M_c=4,079$; $SD_c=1,881$; $M_{nc}=3,397$; $SD_{nc}=1,740$). Following is a way of engaging with a brand that does not entail much public exposure, and therefore goes in line with H3A – there is not much discomfort from this, since it is not directly shared with a friend or follower and is a more passive way of engaging. To account for the effects of the average personal control on the variable, I used PROCESS on SPSS (Hayes 2013), with control being used as a moderator, controversy as the independent variable and their effects on follow were analyzed.

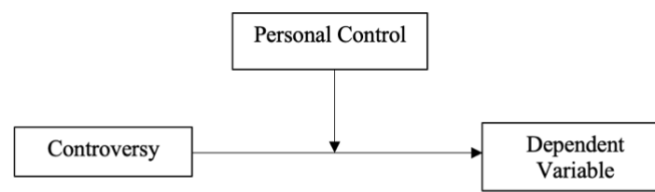
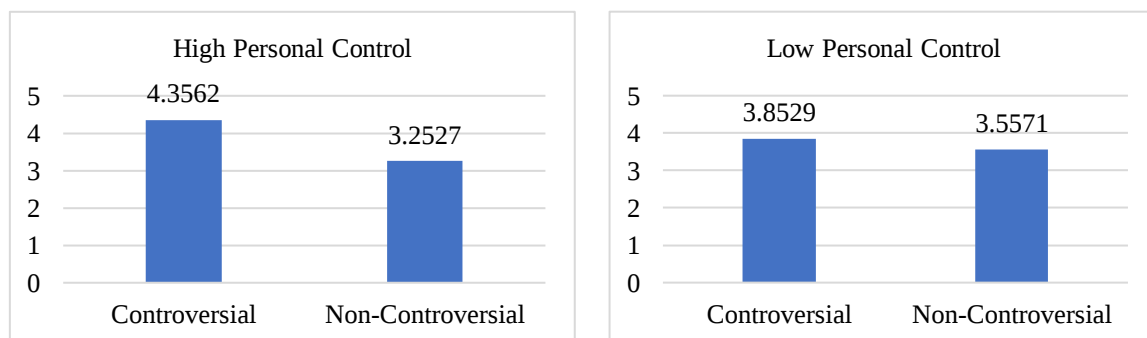


Figure 1: Illustration of Moderation Model 1 (Hayes 2013).

The overall model is significant ($R^2=0,0501$; $F(3,264)=4,6386$; $p=0,0035$). The interaction between controversy and control was marginally significant ($B=0,5190$; $t=1,8252$; $p=0,0691$). Analyzing the conditional effect of this interaction allows to determine that high levels of control are significant and have a positive effect on *follow* ($B=1,1036$; $t=3,5367$; $p=0,0005$).



Figures 2 and 3: Individuals who perceive to have high personal control are more likely to follow a controversial brand than a non-controversial brand. Results for individuals with low personal control were not significant.

The graphs above show how high levels of control influence following in controversial (vs non-controversial) scenario. The data shows that people with higher control would follow more in the controversial (vs non-controversial) scenario. Therefore, for high levels of control, controversy increases following, while the effect is not significant for low levels of control, contrary to what was predicted in H2. Although following does not have a great exposure, it can still be visible, so a possible explanation is that people with more control, being more disinhibited (Anderson and Berdahl 2002; Anderson and Galinsky 2006) and less constrained (Keltner, Gruenfeld and Anderson 2003) would be less afraid of judgement, which allows them to follow if the topic interests them. *Control Order* and (character's) *Gender* were tested, but no relevant results emerged.

Share: An independent samples t-test was performed to test the mean differences between the controversial and non-controversial scenarios and the results were significant ($t(283)=4,157$; $p=0,000$). That said, it is possible to conclude that participants would share more the brand in the controversial (vs non-controversial) scenario ($M_c=3,640$; $SD_c=2,071$; $M_{nc}=2,678$; $SD_{nc}=1,834$). This contradicts H3B, since sharing is visible to any follower and is a public way of showing support to the brand. It was hypothesized that discomfort would surpass interest, however, the opposite seems to happen. One possible explanation is the strong agreement of the individuals towards the cause, which hints that supporting a cause would be more relevant than any possible discomfort caused by opposing views. Regarding (character's) *Gender*, *Control Order* and average personal *Control*, no relevant results were found.

Comment: An independent samples t-test was performed to test the mean differences between the controversial and non-controversial scenarios and the results were significant ($t(283)=3,526$; $p=0,000$). Participants would post more positive comments in the brand's page in the controversial (vs non-controversial) scenario ($M_c=3,928$; $SD_c=1,921$; $M_{nc}=3,130$; $SD_{nc}=1,898$). This contradicts H3B, since comments are visible to anyone and are a public way

of showing support to the brand. It was hypothesized that discomfort would surpass interest, however, the opposite seems to happen. One possible explanation is the strong agreement of the individuals towards the cause, which hints that supporting a cause would be more relevant than any possible discomfort caused by opposing views. *Control Order*, (character's) *Gender* and average personal *Control* did not have relevant results to be reported.

Private message: An independent samples t-test was performed to test the mean differences between the controversial and non-controversial scenarios and the results were significant ($t(283)=2,096$; $p=0,037$). Participants would share more the content in a private message in the controversial (vs non-controversial) scenario ($M_c=4,209$; $SD_c=1,998$; $M_{nc}=3,719$; $SD_{nc}=1,943$). This reinforces hypothesis 3A, since controversial topics are more shared privately, having the interest factor surpassing the discomfort factor, mitigated by the privacy and familiarity of the message recipient. To account for the effects of the average personal *Control* on the variable, a model was tested using PROCESS macro on SPSS (Hayes 2013), with control being used as a moderator, controversy as the independent variable and its effects on sharing through a private message were analyzed (as in Figure 1). The overall model is significant ($R^2=0,0356$; $F(3,264)=3,2438$; $p=0,0226$). The interaction between controversy and control is significant ($B=0,6365$; $t=2,0753$; $p=0,0389$). Analyzing the conditional effect of this interaction allows to determine that results for high levels of control are significant and have a positive effect on private message ($B=1,0384$; $t=3,0815$; $p=0,0023$).

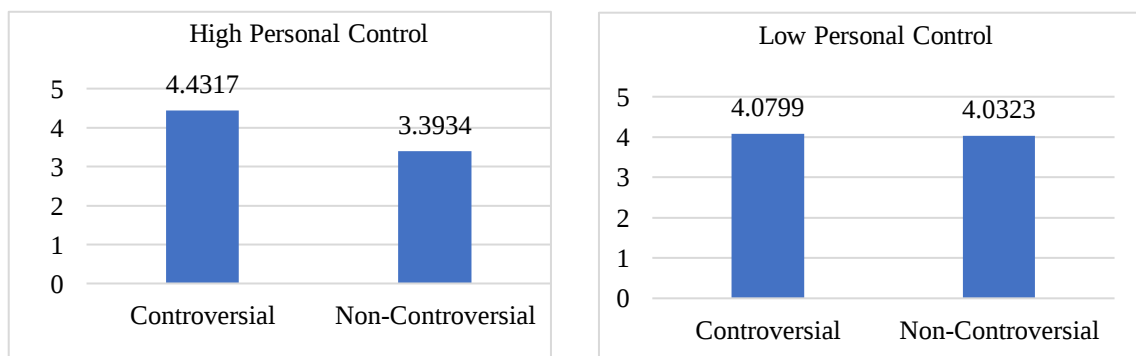


Figure 4 and 5: Individuals who perceive to have high personal control are more likely to share in a private message a controversial (vs non-controversial) brand. Results for individuals with low personal control were not significant.

The data shows that people with higher control would share (privately) more in the controversial (vs non-controversial) scenario. For high levels of control, controversy increases the dependent variable, while the effect is not significant for low levels of control, contrary to what was predicted in H2. A possible explanation is that people with more control, being more disinhibited (Anderson and Berdahl 2002; Anderson and Galinsky 2006), would not worry about possible judgment and would send more private messages only if the topic truly interests them, in order to start a direct conversation with one of their acquaintances. Additionally, *Control Order* and (character's) *Gender* were tested, but no relevant results emerged.

Interpersonal WOM: An independent samples t-test was performed to test the mean differences between the controversial and non-controversial scenarios and the results were significant ($t(274)=3,595$; $p=0,000$). Participants engage more in interpersonal WOM in the controversial (vs non-controversial) scenario ($M_c=4,627$; $SD_c=1,556$; $M_{nc}=3,966$; $SD_{nc}=1,496$). This variable can be broken down into categories: friends, family, colleagues and new acquaintances. For family WOM, an ANOVA with *Controversy* and (character's) *Gender* showed that their interaction is significant ($F(1,278)=5,033$; $p=0,026$).

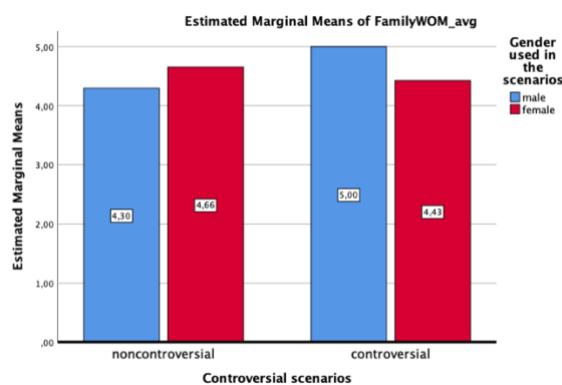
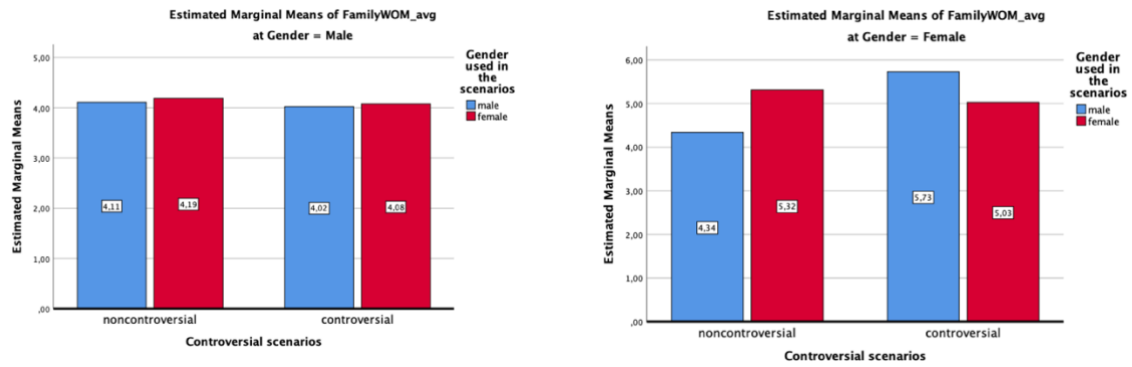


Figure 6: Means of *Family WOM* for all scenarios.

In the graph above, it is possible to see that, in family WOM, the ad with the male (vs female) character is more shared in the controversial scenario, but the opposite happens for the non-controversial scenario. To further investigate this, a new ANOVA was conducted for the dependent variable Family WOM with the fixed *factors*: *Controversy*, (character's) *Gender* and

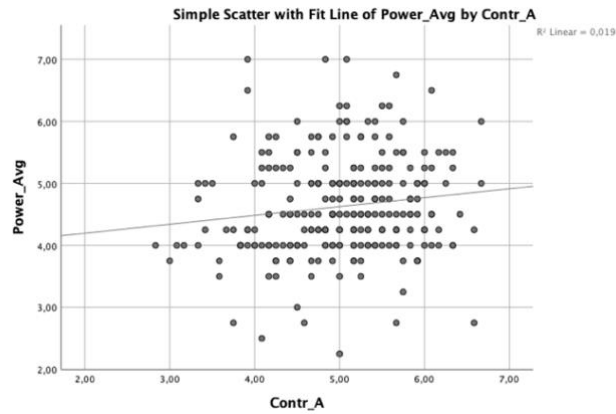
participant's gender. The interaction between controversy, character's gender and participant's gender is marginally significant ($F(1,234)=3,823$; $p=0,052$). In this ANOVA, participant's gender is significant ($F(2,234)=11,808$; $p=0,000$), as is character's gender interaction with controversy ($F(1,234)=4,069$; $p=0,045$).



Figures 7 and 8: Means of *Family WOM* for all scenarios, according to participant's gender.

In this case, the most relevant differences are for females – male participants do not have relevant differences between cases. For female participants, in the controversial scenario, they tend to share more with family when the main character is a male, but the opposite happens for the non-controversial scenario. This was unexpected. Applying the discomfort versus interest theory (Chen and Berger 2013), female participants might feel more uncomfortable in discussing the topic with their family when the main character of the ad shares their gender. *Control Order* and average personal *Control* were tested, but no relevant results emerged.

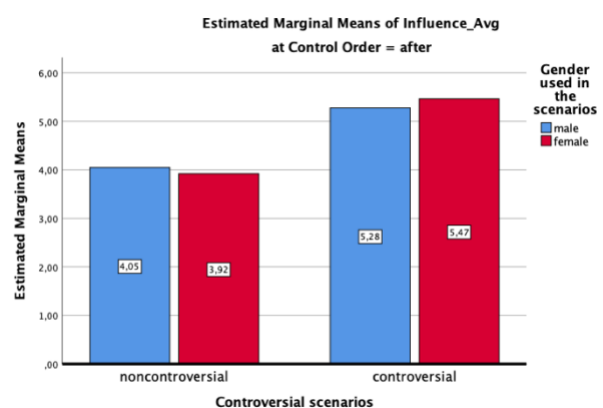
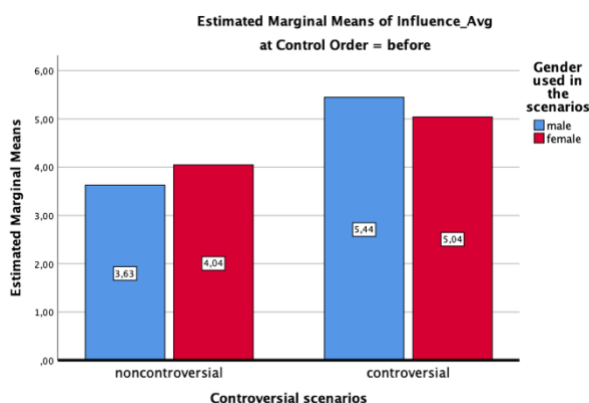
Power: An independent samples t-test was performed to test the mean differences between the controversial and non-controversial scenarios and the results were marginally significant ($t(249)=1,951$; $p=0,052$). Participants perceived the brand in the controversial (vs non-controversial) scenario as more powerful ($M_c=4,720$; $SD_c=0,766$; $M_{nc}=4,520$; $SD_{nc}=0,857$), supporting H1A. To account for the effects of the average personal *Control* on the variable, a ANCOVA was conducted, with controversy as fixed factors and average personal *Control* as a covariate, but their interaction was not significant. However, a linear regression with average personal *Control* showed significance ($R^2= 0,019$; $F(1,245)=4,648$; $p=0,032$).



Figures 9: Scatter with Fit Line of brand *Power* by personal *Control*.

Perceptions of power increase with control ($B=0,144$; $t=2,156$; $p=0,032$). This regression adds the information that people with more control perceive more brand power in the advertisements than people with less control. *Control Order* and (character's) *Gender* were also tested, but no relevant results emerged.

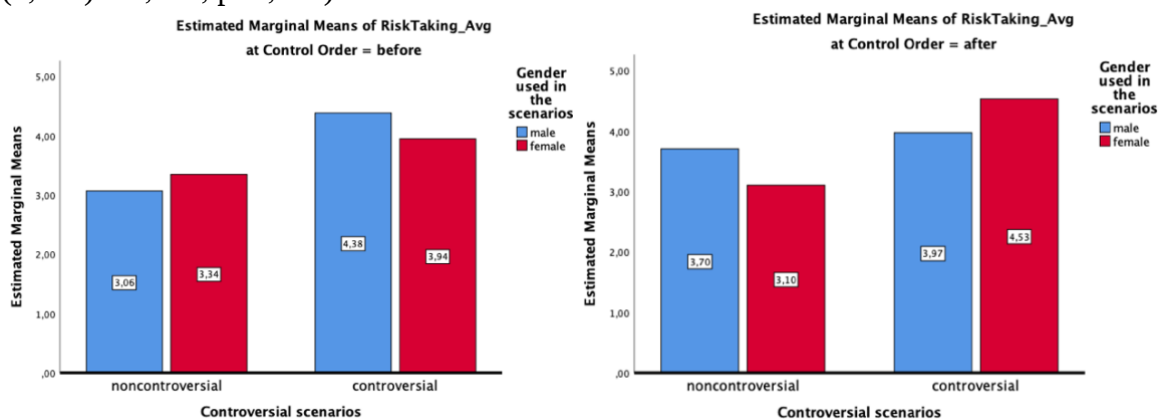
Influence: An independent samples t-test was performed to test the mean differences between the controversial and non-controversial scenarios and the results were significant ($t(252)=9,262$; $p=0,000$). Participants perceived the brand in the controversial (vs non-controversial) scenario as more influential ($M_c=5,304$; $SD_c=1,111$; $M_{nc}=3,916$; $SD_{nc}=1,269$) supporting H1B. A 3-way ANOVA, with *Controversy*, (character's) *Gender* and *Control Order* as fixed factors was also conducted. The interaction between *Control Order*, (character's) *Gender* and *Controversy* is marginally significant ($F(1,246)=3,574$; $p=0,060$).



Figures 10 and 11: Means of brand *Influence* for all scenarios, broken down according to order of control measurement.

As seen before, the brand in controversial scenarios is always considered more influent than in non-controversial scenarios. However, when the control is measured before the scenarios, and therefore hypothesized to be more present in the participant's mind, having a male (vs female) character in the non-controversial scenario seems to decrease perceptions of brand influence, while in the controversial scenario it increases those perceptions. When control is measured after, a male character (vs female) in non-controversial scenario slightly increases influence perceptions, while on a controversial scenario it slightly decreases those perceptions. Tests were performed for average personal *Control*, but no relevant results emerged.

Risk-Taking: An independent samples t-test was performed to test the mean differences between the controversial and non-controversial scenarios and the results were significant ($t(252)=6,469$; $p=0,000$). Participants perceived the brand in the controversial (vs non-controversial) scenario as taking more risks ($M_c=4,202$; $SD_c=1,015$; $M_{nc}=3,306$; $SD_{nc}=1,181$), supporting H1D. A 3-way ANOVA, with *Controversy*, (character's) *Gender* and *Control Order* as fixed variables was conducted to study their effects on the variable. The interaction between control order, (character's) gender and controversy is significant ($F(1,246)=11,814$; $p=0,001$).



Figures 12 and 13: Means of brand *Risk-Taking* for all scenarios, broken down according to order of control measurement.

As seen before, the brand in controversial scenarios is always considered as being more risk taker than in non-controversial scenarios. However, when control is measured before the

scenarios, a male (vs female) character in the non-controversial scenario seems to decrease perceptions of risk taking, while in the controversial scenario it increases those perceptions. When control is measured after, the opposite happens – a male (vs female) character in non-controversial scenario increases risk taking perceptions, while being on a controversial scenario decreases those perceptions. The pattern is the same as the one in brand influence. One possible explanation is in line with the theory that states that men are more likely to be discriminated and be victims of sexual prejudice (Herek 2002). That said, when perceptions of control are more present, using a male homosexual couple might be perceived as riskier, but also increase perceptions of influence, since the brand can afford to take the risk and endorse the cause. Tests were performed with average personal *Control*, but no relevant results emerged.

Autonomy: An independent samples t-test was performed to test the mean differences between the controversial and non-controversial scenarios and the results were significant ($t(251)=3,392$; $p=0,001$). Participants perceived the brand in the controversial (vs non-controversial) scenario as more autonomous ($M_c=4,979$; $SD_c=1,082$; $M_{nc}=4,508$; $SD_{nc}=1,125$), supporting H1C. Tests were performed with *Control Order*, personal *Control average* and (character's) *Gender*, but no relevant results emerged.

Brand Leader: An independent samples t-test was performed to test the mean differences between the controversial and non-controversial scenarios and the results were marginally significant ($t(252)=1,676$; $p=0,095$). Participants perceived the brand in the controversial (vs non-controversial) scenario as more brand leaders ($M_c=4,627$; $SD_c=1,008$; $M_{nc}=4,411$; $SD_{nc}=1,043$), supporting H1E. Tests were performed with *Control Order*, personal *Control average* and (characters') *Gender*, but no relevant results emerged.

6. Discussion

Contrary to the literature that predicted that in some controversy cases the discomfort caused would be higher than the interest, especially if the recipient of the message is not familiar

or if the person is not doing this anonymously (Chen and Berger 2013), participants revealed that across all possible types of WOM, they would affiliate more with the brand and ad of the controversial (vs non-controversial) scenario. Therefore, it does not make sense to have hypothesis 3A and 3B, since in all cases, more or less public, controversy increases the likelihood of conversation. The controversial (vs non-controversial) scenario displayed higher means in *follow*, *share*, *comment* (positive), *share* though *private message* and *interpersonal WOM*. Thus, the controversial (vs noncontroversial) scenario appeals more to the individuals tested than the non- controversial, since they were more likely to engage with the brand in that scenario. It is important to note that, in this case, a vast majority of the sample was in line with the brand's position, since they agreed with the cause that the brand advocated for. To illustrate this, I computed the mean of all the WOM behaviors and this variable was inserted in an ANOVA in which the fixed factors were *Controversy* and *Opinion* on the cause – with agreeing being at least 5 on the scale. The interaction of controversy and opinion is significant ($F(1,240)=24,245; p=0,000$).

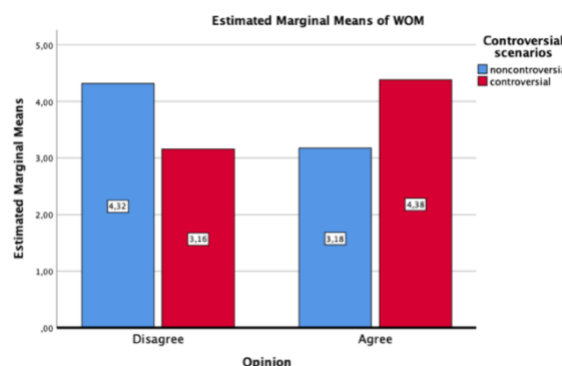


Figure 14: Means of total WOM for all scenarios, according to opinion on the cause.

The data shows that people that agree that LGBTQ+ people should have the right to marry and adopt engage more in WOM in the controversial (vs non-controversial) scenario, but those who disagree engage more in the non-controversial (vs controversial) scenario. However, in this sample, most participants agreed with the brand's positioning on the cause. That being said, it is important that the values of the brand and costumers are aligned, since they are interested in showing support for brands and causes they believe in. This shows that even if the topic may be considered uncomfortable, it is more interesting for those who support the cause.

For the case of compensatory WOM, proposing that people with low (vs high) control would engage more in WOM on controversial topics as a means to restoring control (H2), the hypothesis was not supported. In fact, the data showed how people with higher control experience a significant increase *following* a brand and sharing through a *private message* when the topic is controversial, which was thought to happen for individuals with lower control.

Regarding brand perceptions, results were able to support all the hypothesis – although some just marginally. Having in mind that controversy was successfully manipulated, the brand in the controversial scenario was associated with more power, autonomy, influence, risk-taking and brand-leadership. This reinforces past literature and might be used to build on theories of compensatory behaviors, although WOM did not prove to be a means to do so.

6.1 Implications

This study supports the idea that controversy increases WOM behaviors. Although, in some cases, such as in sharing and commenting, even with controversy increasing their means, values are still low (less than 4), overall, controversy seems to increase conversation, interest and engagement. Still, brands need to be cautious when engaging in these topics – it is important to have in mind that the brand might lose consumers who disagree with their position. Consumer's opinion on the matter is crucial and seems to dictate engagement and prevail over possible discomfort caused. Social media has been fostering engagement on social movements and young people have been using hashtags to show their support for social movements – such as #LoveWins for the LGBTQ+ community (Stornaiuolo and Thomas 2017) – which might explain this interest. This suggests that engaging in a controversial topic in line with consumer's opinions will attract attention and positive engagement. Also, the brand might benefit from the perceptions associated with being controversial, but unexpected results might always emerge. It is important to note that perceptions of power slightly increase with personal control, which can lead to different perceptions of power depending on the consumer's levels of control.

6.2 Limitations

The sample used did not show, in general, low values of control. Around 86.9% of the sample had more than 4 on the control scale (Annex 4), which did not allow to fully understand how people with low control would behave in such scenarios. This proved to be a limitation to take solid conclusions on compensatory behaviors for low levels of control and might differ if a bigger sample was reached. Other characteristics of the sample's demographics are also a limitation, since the answers of nationality indicate 90,1% Portuguese participants (more on Annex 2). Opinions and behaviors might be different depending on nationalities, which means that the results might differ if other countries were more represented.

7. Conclusion & Future Research

Although engaging in controversial topics through WOM was not proven to compensate for low levels of control, this study adds to the current literature and presents new conclusions. Discomfort does not seem to be a crucial factor, since controversial topics seem to be more interesting to participants – having in mind their position on the matter. Also, the hypothesized brand perceptions were supported, which reinforces previous literature. This work as showed that brands that take controversial (vs non-controversial) stands are perceived as more powerful, influential, autonomous, risk-takers and brand leaders. However, we know that there might be backlash when brands get involved in controversial topics. Future research could test brand perceptions having in mind negative attributes that can be associated with controversy and were not tested in this report. It would be beneficial to know better the negative perceptions associated with being controversial to better weight that with the more positive attributes mentioned above.

Building on the limitations section, future research would benefit from the use of a bigger sample, especially one that has representation of individuals with lower personal control to better evaluate the compensatory mechanisms that may occur.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Online questionnaire.

Q.1. Do you have an Instagram account?

Q.2. Please read very carefully the information about a perfume brand below, then answer the following questions.

Scenario 1 – Non-controversial, Male character

Scents is a perfume brand launching a new version of one of their products. As part of their advertising campaign, the brand made a video commercial. It started with a husband and wife gifting their **young son, John**, a perfume bottle. Years later, **John and his wife** are shown offering the same perfume **to their child**. The ad promoted the importance of family and values passed through generations, which were symbolized by the perfume bottle. This commercial used a quite **normal portrait** of a family in the country where it is was displayed.

Or

Scenario 2 – Non-controversial, Female character

Scents is a perfume brand launching a new version of one of their products. As part of their advertising campaign, the brand made a video commercial. It started with a husband and wife gifting their **young daughter, Emily**, a perfume bottle. Years later, **Emily and her husband** are shown offering the same perfume **to their child**. The ad promoted the importance

of family and values passed through generations, which were symbolized by the perfume bottle. This commercial used a **quite normal portrait** of a family in the country where it is was displayed.

Or

Scenario 3 - Controversial, Male character

Scents is a perfume brand launching a new version of one of their products. As part of their advertising campaign, the brand made a video commercial. It started with a husband and wife gifting **their young son, John**, a perfume bottle. Years later, **John and his husband** are shown offering the same perfume to **their child**. The ad promoted the importance of family and values passed through generations, which were symbolized by the perfume bottle. This commercial generated a heated public discussion due to the display of a **same-sex couple** and because the brand advocated in favor of the **LGBTQ+ community** and **their right to marry and adopt**.

Or

Scenario 4 - Controversial, Female character

Scents is a perfume brand launching a new version of one of their products. As part of their advertising campaign, the brand made a video commercial. It started with a husband and wife gifting their **young daughter, Emily**, a perfume bottle. Years later, **Emily and her wife** are shown offering the same perfume **to their child**. The ad promoted the importance of family and values passed through generations, which were symbolized by the perfume bottle. This commercial generated a heated public discussion due to the display of a **same-sex couple** and because the brand advocated in favor of the **LGBTQ+ community** and **their right to marry and adopt**.

Taking into account the commercial above...

Q.3. How interested would you be in **following** Scents' page on Instagram?

Q.4. How likely would you be to **share** this commercial on Instagram (using your Instagram stories)?

Q.5. How likely would you be to leave a **positive comment** on the brand's Instagram page?

Q.6. How likely are you to **send** the brand's commercial **to a friend in a private message**?

Q.7. To what extent would you be likely to **mention** this commercial to friends/family/colleagues/ a new acquaintance?

Q.8. If some related topic comes up in a conversation with the people mentioned below, to what extent would you be likely to mention this commercial (friends/family/colleagues/ a new acquaintance)?

Q.9. Measure brand perceptions

To what extent do you agree with the following sentences (1=agree strongly;7=disagree strongly):

Powerful

1. I think the brand has a great deal of power.
2. The brand opinions are often ignored.
3. Even when it tries, the brand is not able to get it its own way.
4. The brand can get people to listen to what it says.

Influential

5. This brand has an effect on society.

6. *Scents* contributes to changing the status quo.
7. *Scents* has influence on world's issues.
8. *Scents* is likely to cause debate.
9. *Scents* is helping to change outcomes in the world.

A risk taker

11. The brand is not afraid of taking risks.
12. With this marketing campaign, the brand is taking a risk.
13. With this marketing campaign, the brand has potentially much to lose.
14. With this marketing campaign, the brand has more to lose than to gain.

Autonomous

15. If *Scents* wants to, the brand gets to make its own independent decisions.
16. This brand is able to get its own way if it wants.
17. The brand shows that it can afford to do what it wants.

A brand leader

18. The brand is probably one of the best in its industry.
19. This brand is likely to mobilize people
20. The brand might be a leader in its industry.

Manipulation of Controversy Check

21. This advertisement is likely to cause opposing views.
22. This advertisement is likely to cause discomfort.
23. This advertisement will divide people.
24. People will have strong opinions about this ad.

Q.10. Measure Control

1. I can do just about anything I really set my mind to.

2. When I really want to do something, I usually find a way to succeed at it.
3. Whether or not I am able to get what I want is in my own hands.
4. What happens to me in the future mostly depends on me.
5. There is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life.
6. I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems of life.
7. Other people determine most of what I can and cannot do.
8. What happens in my life is often beyond my control.
9. There are many things that interfere with what I want to do.
10. I have little control over the things that happen to me.
11. There is really no way I can solve the problems I have.
12. I sometimes feel I am being pushed around in my life.

Q.11. Indicate, on average, how many hours, per day, do you spend on Instagram.

Q.12. In general, to what extent do you discuss gender issues and LGBTQ+ rights with your family/friends/our colleagues/new acquaintances/on social media?

Q.13. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement:

LGBTQ+ people should have the right to marry and adopt.

Q.14. To what extent are you personally involved in this cause of LGTBQ+ marriage and adoption rights?

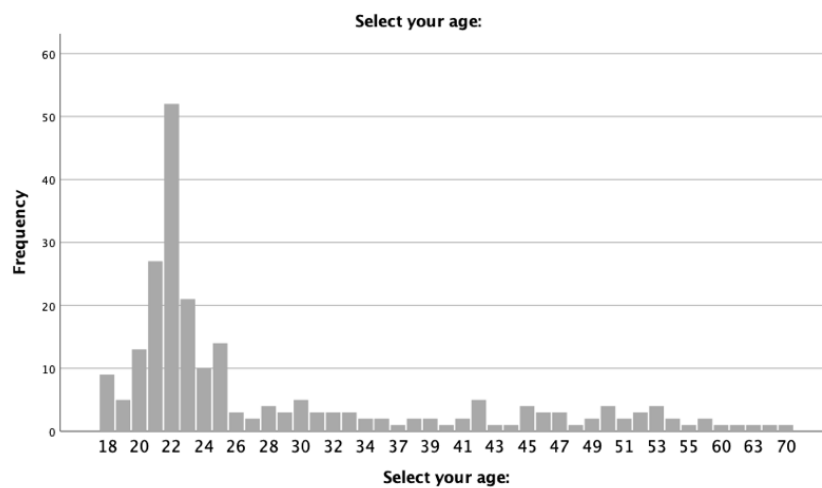
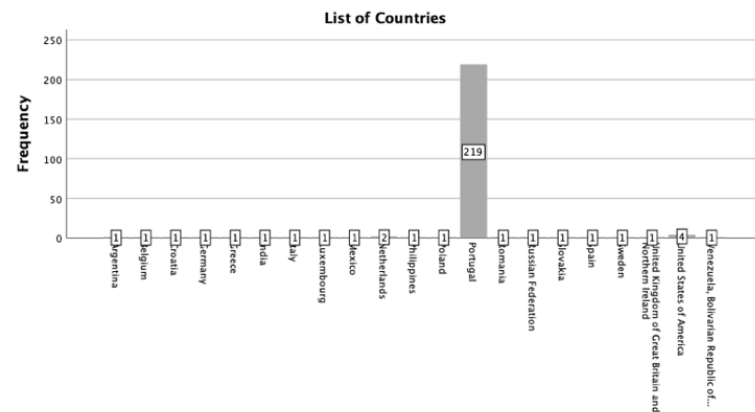
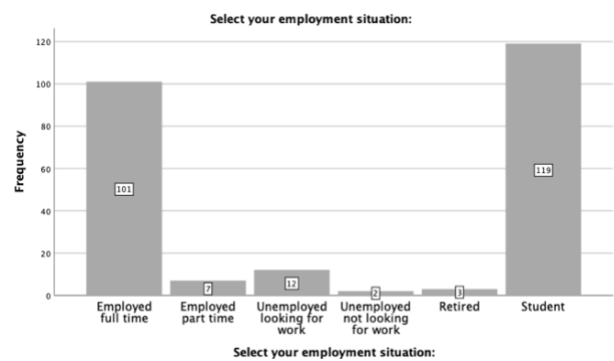
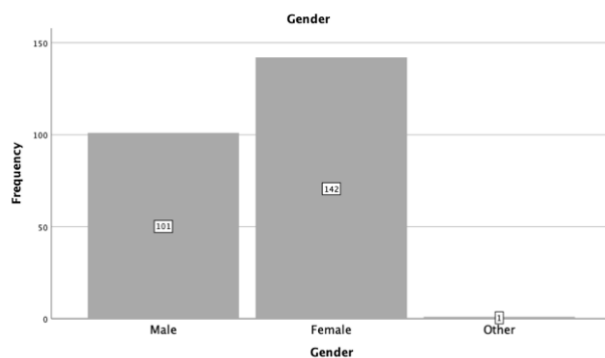
Q.15. To what extent is this cause important to you?

Q.16. Demographics:

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Nationality
3. Employment Situation

Q.17. The Coronavirus situation makes me feel... (1-Extremely anxious/7-Extremely calm)

Annex 2: Sample Demographics



Annex 3: Tests of normality

	Tests of Normality					
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Follow	0,156	242	0,000	0,925	242	0,000
Share	0,21	242	0,000	0,872	242	0,000
Comment	0,167	242	0,000	0,899	242	0,000
Private Message	0,166	242	0,000	0,907	242	0,000
Interpersonal WOM	0,067	242	0,010	0,969	242	0,000
Influence	0,091	242	0,000	0,973	242	0,000
Perception of Controversy	0,111	242	0,000	0,956	242	0,000
Autonomy	0,102	242	0,000	0,97	242	0,000
Power	0,121	242	0,000	0,971	242	0,000
Brand Leader	0,151	242	0,000	0,947	242	0,000
Risk-Taker	0,078	242	0,001	0,986	242	0,020
Control	0,054	238	0,092	0,988	238	0,051

Annex 4: More sample attributes.

