

# When Controversy Pays Off: Conditions for the Strategic Use of Controversy in Digital Marketing

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**Abstract.** Controversy in digital marketing presents both risks and opportunities as brands contend with saturated attention economies and highly engaged online audiences. This article offers a systematic literature review, conducted in accordance with PRISMA guidelines, of peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2018 and April 2025 in Scopus. Selected works spanned multiple platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) and employed diverse methodologies, including computational text mining, big-data sentiment analysis, qualitative case studies, and experimental designs. A synthesis identifies four interlocking components essential for effective controversy management. First, proactive monitoring and early detection leverage computational tools to flag emergent or reputationally hazardous discussions. Second, inclusive stakeholder dialogue and engagement emphasize multi-stakeholder consultations and counter-conduct analyses to promote transparent communication. Third, strategic communication and framing involve crafting contextually tailored messages that respect local idioms and norms. Fourth, adaptive learning and governance close the feedback loop, enabling continuous refinement of strategies in response to evolving digital discourse. Building on these insights, a four-pillar framework is proposed (anticipation, engagement, communication, and learning) to guide digital marketing practitioners in transforming controversy into strategic advantage.

**Keywords:** Controversy, Digital Marketing, Online Engagement, Brand Image, Social Media, Authenticity, Attention Economy.

## 1 Introduction

Faced with the growing saturation of the advertising environment, which compromises the perceived effectiveness of digital marketing campaigns, some brands adopt a provocative approach, aiming to differentiate themselves, capture public attention, and ensure memorability [1]. This strategy has proven effective despite criticism over its potentially offensive style. Controversy can be defined as a complex social phenomenon characterized by public disagreement and debate on matters of opinion [2]. Controversial advertising campaigns stimulate higher levels of sharing and engagement, particularly on digital platforms, due to their provocative nature and ability to elicit intense

emotional reactions [3]. Consequently, digital marketers may be inclined to leverage controversial messages, perceived by many as ethically problematic, to attract sufficient attention in an increasingly competitive advertising environment. However, such controversial messages may also provoke adverse reactions, diminishing their overall effectiveness. Unethical actions and decisions can negatively impact corporate image, increase consumer dissatisfaction, and reduce purchase intentions [4].

The interconnection between controversy, digital platforms, and engagement has been explored by scholars from an online behavioral perspective. Controversial behaviors strategically used by digital content creators, especially in video platforms, promote engagement but also toxicity [5]. The rise of forms of digital activism has introduced further complexities into the marketing landscape. CEOs, as highly visible corporate leaders, increasingly engage in socio-political debates that extend beyond traditional corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives [6]; CEO activism can enhance brand differentiation and consumer loyalty by aligning corporate actions with consumer values, however, it also carries risks, notably the potential for consumer backlash, boycotts, and reputational harm. Brands and creators must navigate a delicate balance, where provocative strategies designed to maximize engagement may inadvertently erode brand equity. Brand reputation and controversy are intrinsically tied through mechanisms of social media engagement, where public opinion and discourse rapidly evolve and shape brand perception [7].

As the field evolves with empirical studies, it is crucial to aggregate the knowledge and provide a comprehensive understanding of the conditions and factors influencing consumer reactions to controversial digital marketing. The available studies focus on isolated elements such as consumer perceptions, CEO activism, and content-driven engagement, lacking a comprehensive analytical framework that unifies these components. This study, by performing a systematic literature review, seeks to address this gap by examining the following research question: **"Under what contextual conditions does the strategic use of controversy in digital marketing enhance or detract from brand effectiveness and consumer engagement?"** The research aims to clarify how brands can strategically use controversy while maintaining ethical standards and positive consumer relationships, according to recent empirical evidence. This study contributes to a nuanced understanding of controversial digital marketing, informing more effective and responsible digital marketing strategies.

## 2 Methods

This systematic literature review adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines, which determine transparent procedures for executing the search, the screening, and elaborating the final synthesis [8].

Scopus was chosen as a reputable database, and the authors used the string: [( ( ( controversies\* OR provocative OR backlash OR "emotional response\*" OR "emotional engagement" ) AND ( "marketing campaign" OR "digital marketing" OR "social media marketing" OR "influencer marketing" ) ) OR "controvers\* marketing" )]. The query

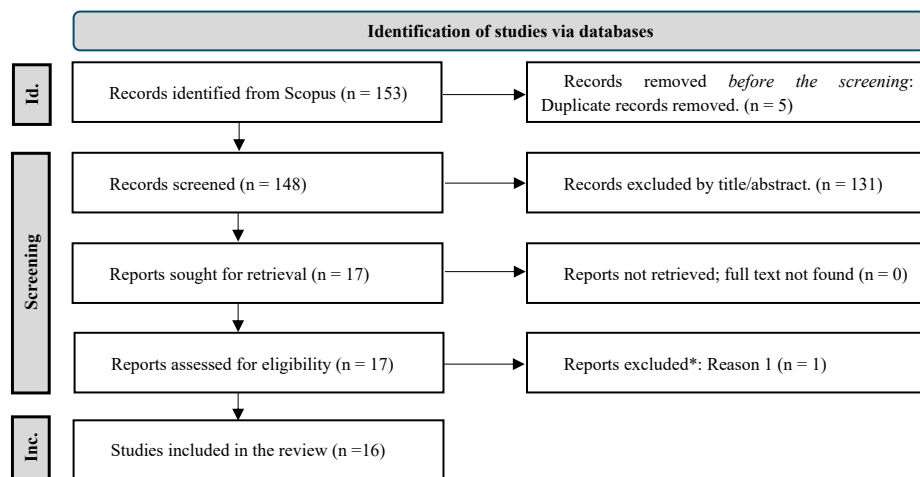
targeted literature on controversy-related themes in the field of marketing across all digital channels from 2018 onward.

The search was performed on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April 2025 and returned 153 records. Scopus exports were uploaded into the platform Rayyan.ai, where automated and manual checks of author names, titles, and Digital Object Identifiers identified five duplicates. After removal, 148 unique records remained for screening.

Prior to screening, the authors agreed on inclusion and exclusion rules aligned with the research question. Articles were included if they were empirical, peer-reviewed journal articles or conference proceedings published in English between 2018 and 2025 and provided data relevant to how controversy in digital marketing influences consumer perceptions. Articles were excluded if they were books, literature reviews, meta-analyses, conceptual or theoretical only, written in languages other than English, published before 2018, or irrelevant to the stated research question.

Screening proceeded in a double-blind manner. Each author independently reviewed the 148 titles and abstracts. Discrepancies were logged and resolved through discussion. 131 records were excluded at this stage for failing at least one criterion (most commonly non-empirical design or irrelevance to the RQ), leaving 17 full-text reports.

All 17 reports were retrieved. Independent full-text assessments applied the same criteria. One article, classified as a conceptual study, was excluded. For the 16 eligible studies, the authors extracted bibliographic details, methodology, sample characteristics, and findings. Extraction sheets were compared; minor variances were reconciled by consensus. Then the authors analyzed and compared the collected data. The process is illustrated in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1.** PRISMA flow diagram for the systematic review process to identify relevant studies. Source: Self-elaboration based on [8].

### 3 Results

The results from the SLR process are presented in Table 1. Overall, the evidence shows a clear upward trend, with output doubling between the 2018–2021 period (five studies) and the 2022–2025 period (eleven studies), and a discernible shift from exploratory conference contributions to full journal articles as the topic matures.

**Table 1.** Results from the SLR process

Authors	Source	Research objective	Method
Yu, Yu [7]	iConference 2018 Proceedings (Lecture Notes in Computer Science, 10766, 87–96)	Propose a topic modeling approach for tracking controversial topics in social media.	Quantitative – computational text mining (LDA topic modeling) on 148,562 Facebook comments; manual topic interpretation and temporal analysis.
Szarecki [9]	European Journal of Cultural Studies, 23(4), 580–595	To investigate the non-linear dynamics of networked culture by analyzing a controversial digital marketing campaign.	Qualitative – single case study.
Xu and Zhou [10]	Computers in Human Behavior, 102, 87–96	To analyze Twitter discourses surrounding Gillette’s 2019 controversial CRM campaign.	Quantitative big-data study: LDA topic modelling of 107,641 original tweets collected over 11 days.
Chen, Zhang [11]	Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Artificial Intelligence and Big Data, IEEE	To quantitatively assess gender-differentiated consumer attitudes toward femvertising.	Quantitative big-data sentiment analysis. Collected 29,174 brand-related Weibo posts.
Szarecki [12]	International Journal of Cultural Studies, 24(6), 881–898.	To employ post-hegemonic theory to re-examine how power operates within online cultures.	Qualitative single-case study using Facebook pages.
Tu and Neumann [13]	Proceedings of The ACM Web Conference 2022 (WWW ’22), Virtual Event, Lyon, France	To develop and test a hybrid model that combines the Friedkin–Johnsen opinion-dynamics framework with the independent cascade model.	Quantitative computational study.
Coromina, Tsinovoi [14]	Big Data & Society, July–December 2023, 1–15.	To demonstrate how Google Ads can be repurposed as a methodological lens and dataset for mapping socio-technical controversies.	Qualitative, digital-methods development study.

Döbbe and Cederberg [15]	Journal of Business Ethics, 192, 21–37.	To investigate how consumers collectively contest responsabilization.	Qualitative, interpretive single-case study.
Oriakhi, Amin [16]	Proceedings of the 2023 International Conference on IT Innovation and Knowledge Discovery, IEEE.	To examine how negative comments, controversial brand posts and fake news on social media influence brand image and, in turn, purchase intention.	Quantitative survey.
[5]	Proceedings of the 4th International Workshop on Open Challenges in Online Social Networks, ACM	To quantitatively investigate the interplay between controversy, toxicity and monetization on YouTube.	Quantitative big-data study. Compiled 16,349 videos and 105 million comments from 20 controversial YouTube channels.
Duarte [6]	Estudos em Comunicação, 39 (Special Issue 1), 145–159.	To analyze Portuguese consumers’ perceptions, attitudes and behavioral intentions toward CEO activism.	Quantitative online survey. Convenience + snowball sampling of 550 Portuguese respondents.
Gerrath, Olya [17]	Journal of Business Research, 175, 114520	To investigate how virtual influencers (VIs) can effectively promote pro-environmental campaigns.	Multi-method study: (1) 16 semi-structured interviews; (2) Study 1 – 2 × 2 online experiment with 436 participants; (3) Study 2 – 2 × 2 experiment with 415 participants.
[18]	Heliyon, 10, e39808	To examine how the word count of Facebook posts by leading sports shoe brands affects user engagement and eight emotional reactions.	Quantitative big-data study. Collected 636 Facebook posts (2013-2023) from 10 sports shoe brands.
Lenoir and Arias Labrador [19]	Journal of Communication Inquiry, 48(4), 559–580	To interrogate how the controversy surrounding Netflix’s marketing of Cuties (2020) reveals processes of ‘othering’ Black girlhood.	Qualitative multimodal critical discourse analysis.
Rahman [20]	International Marketing Review, 41(3-4), 615-641	To test if the grammatical structure of a country’s predominant language predicts firms’ propensity to engage in controversial marketing.	Quantitative, multi-level design. Panel dataset of 5,275 firms across 47 countries (2001-2020); 39,956 firm-year observations.
Lee and Chung [21]	Journal of Business Research, 192, 115300	To test, which signals convey the authenticity of influencers’ social-cause com-	Experiments. Study 1: 2 × 2 design manipulating transparency and cause-influ-

<p>munications and how perceived authenticity shapes consumers' and pro-social behavioral intentions.</p>	<p>encer fit using mock Instagram posts; Study 2: identical design with controversial causes and stance-congruency measure.</p>
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Conference papers make up one quarter of the sample and appear in 2018, 2021, 2022, and 2024, indicating that methods-driven or computational work on digital controversy is often disseminated first in proceedings. The remaining three quarters are journal articles published steadily since 2019, reflecting the field's consolidation.

## 4 Discussion

The analysis of the sixteen studies selected for this review reveals a body of work that, despite its variety of methods and foci, converges on several higher-order insights about controversy in digital marketing.

Across multiple contexts, the way a message is framed conditions whether controversy becomes constructive conversation or brand damage. Warmth, transparency, and sufficient informational depth consistently foster favorable responses. Warm, narrative language reduced psychological distance and raised behavioral engagement with pro-environmental appeals [17]; transparent disclosure of an influencer's motives signaled authenticity and improved attitudes [21]. Even purely technical choices, such as post length, created emotional lift: longer Facebook posts by sports-shoe brands increased trust, anticipation, joy, and surprise [18]. Unexpectedly, an experiment with British university students showed that exposure to negative comments, fake news, and controversial brand posts strengthened perceived brand image and, via that image, increased purchase intention, suggesting that some audiences may reinterpret negativity as proof of brand relevance [16]. By contrast, opaque or purely rhetorical appeals backfired. Intel's celebrity-based femvertisement alienated both supporters and detractors of gender equality [11], while a Portuguese CEO's public stance against abortion generated lasting reputational harm despite limited effects on purchase intention [6]. Together, the findings point to a broad consistency: claims that are transparent, information-rich, and grounded in the communicator's domain of expertise inoculate brands against much of the risk inherent in social controversy. Nevertheless, the counter-intuitive uplift reported by Oriakhi, Amin [16] reminds researchers and managers that negativity does not invariably erode value and can, under certain conditions, activate defensive loyalty instead.

Several studies shift attention from message senders to the techno-economic infrastructures that modulate visibility. YouTube's monetization features reward engagement but penalize toxicity, leading creators to a "grey zone" where controversial behavior is sufficient to drive views but not so toxic as to deter advertisers [5]. Google Ads' auction metrics function as epistemic artefacts that make issues tradable commodities in attention markets [14]. Topic-modelling of 150,000 Starbucks comments showed that even routine promotional posts attract recurrent flashpoints [7], confirming

that algorithmic surfacing of user sentiment keeps controversy alive. Beyond individual actors, platform architectures entangle marketing campaigns in self-reinforcing cycles of amplification.

Foucault-inspired analyses show that resistance often reinforces neoliberal responsibility frames rather than disrupting them. Swedish consumers who criticized a chicken-as-climate-solution campaign demanded more responsible options, challenged truth claims, and vilified cattle farming, yet they accepted the premise that individual shoppers should address climate change. [15]. Similarly, vernacular backlash to a Polish government video passed through media and meme cultures only to consolidate prevailing power relations [9, 12]. These studies reveal a paradox: collective ‘push-back’ frequently legitimizes the very discourse it seeks to contest, by accepting personal consumption as the primary site of moral agency.

Outcomes vary markedly with cultural and identity framings. Analysis of the Netflix *Cuties* controversy shows that Black girlhood was simultaneously politicized and commodified, with mainstream press oscillating between moral panic and marketplace logic [19]. Linguistic structure also matters; firms based in strong future-tense languages engaged more often in controversial environmental practices than those in weak-FTR languages, suggesting that temporal cognition shapes corporate risk-taking [20]. On Twitter, ideological hashtags (#MeToo, #MAGA) rather than conceptual ones (#Advertising) generated homophilic clustering and polarized networks around a Gillette campaign [10]. Thus, controversy cannot be decoupled from broader struggles over gender, race, language, and ideology.

Methodological contributions provide tools for practitioners. Auto-tracking approaches can locate controversial topics and activists for rapid response [7]. An opinion-dynamics model combining viral cascades with Friedkin–Johnsen learning shows that even small seeds of polarizing content can raise network-wide disagreement by 59% [13], and a disagreement–controversy index offers data-driven bounds for measuring campaign impact. These innovations equip marketers with actionable diagnostics to anticipate and steer controversy.

#### 4.1 Framework for managing controversy in digital marketing

Building on the systematic review’s findings, a four-pillar framework is proposed to guide practitioners in responding to and learning from digital marketing controversies.

First, **proactive monitoring & early detection** leverages computational text-mining and network-analysis techniques to surface nascent fault lines before they escalate. Topic modeling, as demonstrated in the Starbucks case, can automatically identify emerging controversial themes and track their temporal dynamics, enabling early warning of crisis indicators [7]. Complementarily, hashtag-based mention-network analysis reveals how ideological markers drive homophily in user interactions, pinpointing clusters of heightened risk [10]. Finally, measuring toxicity alongside engagement metrics detects spikes in negative, and potentially reputationally damaging, discussion [5].

Second, **inclusive stakeholder dialogue & engagement** emphasizes multi-channel listening and collective sense-making. By repurposing digital-marketing artefacts (e.g., Google Ads keyword valuations, click-through data) as “listening posts,” organizations

gain a panoramic view of attention flows, revealing how attention markets shape issue salience [14]. Concurrently, mapping forms of collective “counter-conduct” (subtle, community-oriented resistance observed in the Swedish poultry campaign) uncovers how audiences mobilize around shared concerns, challenge truth claims, and form alliances that can amplify or redirect controversy [15]. Embedding cross-functional rapid-response teams ensures that insights from listening posts and counter-conduct analyses inform timely stakeholder outreach.

Third, **strategic communication & framing** require crafting messages that foreground transparency and authenticity, acknowledging both organizational values and stakeholder perspectives. Recent evidence shows that perceived authenticity in messaging can inoculate brands against backlash by reducing psychological distance [17], while transparent disclosure of motives fosters trust and mitigates skepticism [21]. Culturally sensitive framing (adapting language, symbols, and narratives to diverse audiences) helps prevent misinterpretation, as shown in multi-national campaigns where local idioms and norms significantly affect reception [20].

Finally, **adaptive learning & governance** close the loop by systematically evaluating both successful interventions and missteps. Post-incident analyses should decompose response outcomes, identifying which monitoring signals were predictive and which framing tactics resonated [12, 18]. These insights should feed into refined policies and guidelines, codifying best practices for future controversies, and be disseminated through targeted training programs that build organizational readiness [6, 19]. Such governance mechanisms institutionalize the framework, ensuring that controversy management evolves with the shifting dynamics of digital discourse.

Together, these four interlocking components form an end-to-end analytical framework that empowers practitioners to anticipate, engage, communicate, and learn.

## 5 Conclusions

This systematic review synthesizes 16 peer-reviewed studies from 2018 to 2025 about controversy in digital marketing. Three key contributions emerge. First, it clarifies how controversies affect consumer cognition, brand equity, and policy debates by integrating antecedents, platform affordances, and stakeholder responses. Second, it broadens the theoretical landscape by juxtaposing marketing-centered work with cultural studies, emphasizing power, affect, and social responsibility. Third, the study combines qualitative cultural analyses with computational techniques like topic modeling and deep-learning sentiment mining to capture meaning and scale.

A framework is proposed to guide digital marketing practitioners in managing controversy, highlighting the roles of proactive monitoring & early detection, inclusive stakeholder dialogue & engagement, strategic communication & framing, and adaptive learning & governance. By integrating cutting-edge analytical methods with stakeholder-centric practices and robust governance, organizations can transform controversy from a reactive threat into a strategic opportunity for digital marketing practices.

Despite these contributions, several limitations warrant caution. The search strategy was confined to English-language journal articles indexed in Scopus; other databases,

relevant grey literature, and non-English scholarship may therefore be under-represented. In addition, the heterogeneity of study designs and outcome measures precluded meta-analysis, limiting the ability to quantify effect sizes. Finally, rapid changes in platform governance (e.g., content-moderation policies) mean that some empirical findings risk becoming quickly outdated.

Future research should address these gaps by: (1) conducting longitudinal, cross-platform investigations that trace controversies from emergence to resolution; (2) employing experimental and quasi-experimental designs to isolate causal effects of message features such as transparency, fit and warmth on consumer trust; (3) extending inquiry to under-studied regions and languages to test the linguistic relativity effects suggested by [20]; (4) examining the role of generative AI and virtual influencers in amplifying or mitigating contentious content; and (5) collaborating with practitioners and regulators to develop evidence-based guidelines that balance brand voice, social responsibility and stakeholder well-being. By pursuing these avenues, scholars can deepen theoretical understanding and inform more ethical and resilient digital marketing practice.

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