

## **ADVERTISING IN THE DIGITAL ERA: THE IMPACT OF APPLE'S CONTROVERSIAL CAMPAIGN ON BRAND IMAGE**

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### **Abstract**

Social media have become key tools for spreading advertising messages quickly allowing advertising content to go viral and exponentially increasing the visibility of products. Public interaction and participation have become essential in building brand image, where these digital platforms facilitate two-way interaction between brands and consumers through comments, likes, shares, or even direct criticism. In early May 2024, the iPad Pro advertisement shook the digital world—not because of its technological sophistication but due to the controversy surrounding the ad titled “Crush!” after it was posted by Apple CEO Tim Cook on his social media account X. The public responded to the 60-second ad with criticism and negative comments, deeming it is offensive ad to artists and the creative community. In some cases, negative reactions can lead to a decline in public trust and brand reputation; however, controversy can also raise awareness and interest in a product. This journal employs a content analysis approach to understand the message conveyed through the advertisement and evaluate public responses on social media and in news articles. This case study demonstrates that in a highly connected digital era, the impact of advertisements on brand image can be widespread and intense. Therefore, advertisers need to be more careful and ethical in designing their advertising messages, considering the potential for diverse audience reactions.

**Keywords:** *Digital Advertising, Social Media, Brand Image, Crisis Management*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Digital technology has had a significant impact on the broadcasting industry, leading to a transition in Indonesia's television industry. As of year 2021, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (Kemenkominfo) has implemented regulations regarding the Analog Switch Off (ASO), and by the year of 2023 Indonesia's television industry has officially transitioned to digital broadcasting. Moreover, this transformation has significantly affected the broadcasting industry as digital-based broadcasting offered more choices on streaming platforms alongside television as options to enjoy digital broadcast, thus resulting television networks to explored audience-favored platforms or launched their own apps to reach wider audiences. The rise in digital consumption in Indonesia, according to Statista.com (2024), is predicted to increase,

driven by the tech-savvy younger generation, with digital media market revenues projected to reach US\$2.64 billion in 2024. With the global increase in internet usage and easier access to digital content, this highlights the immense potential for digital content, including advertising to reach a broader audience. Data from dataportal.com (2024) shows that there will be 5.35 billion internet users worldwide in 2024, accounting for 66.2% of the global population. The number of internet users grew by 1.8% in the past year, with 97 million new users in 2023 alone.

This wider audience reach presents an opportunity for producers to leverage their marketing promotions, particularly in advertising. Advertising in the digital era has evolved from traditional formats like television, radio, and print to interactive and personalized digital formats. Platforms such as Google Ads, Facebook Ads, and Instagram enable producers

to target audiences more specifically based on demographics, interests, and behaviors. According to Statista.com (2024), global spending on digital advertising through social media is expected to reach US\$219.8 billion in 2024. This advertising spend reflects a significant shift from conventional to digital media. Although separate and ongoing research is needed to determine whether digital advertising effectively drives the increment of customer's purchase or enhances brand equity, a study by Nielsen in 2021 found that digitally targeted ads are up to three (3) times more effective than conventionally targeted ads, as digital ads allow for precise measurement through metrics such as click-through rates (CTR), conversion rates, and engagement.

Digital platforms, particularly social media, have become primary tools for quickly and widely disseminating advertising messages. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok enable ad content to go viral, exponentially increasing the visibility of a product or services. Major brands like Apple have embraced digital content in their promotion. This trend is likely due to the fact that public interaction and participation play a crucial role in building a product's image, as digital platforms enable two-way interactions between brands and consumers through comments, likes, shares, or even direct criticism of the ads. According to Sprout Social (2023), 76% of consumers say they are more likely to purchase from brands that respond to them. This shows that social media is not only useful as a distribution channel but also as a means of building relationships with consumers.

Apple, a renowned brand from the United States, understands the concept of fast and widespread message dissemination, and this is often utilized by Apple's top executives when introducing its new products. In early May 2024, the iPad Pro advertisement shook the digital world, not because of its technological advancements but due to the controversy

sparked by the ad titled "Crush!" after it was posted by Apple CEO Tim Cook via his X social media account @tim\_cook on Tuesday, May 7, 2024. The short video showed various artworks, such as sculptures, musical instruments, books, recording devices, typewriters, and arcade machines being destroyed, leading to the introduction of a new device, the iPad Pro. Tim captioned the post on his account, "Introducing the new iPad Pro: the thinnest product we've ever created, the most advanced display we've ever produced, with incredible power from the M4 chip. Just imagine all the things used to create it."

The public responded to the 60-second ad with criticism and negative comments, deeming it inappropriate and offensive to artists and the creative community. Moreover, the controversy was amplified by a previous call to boycott the American film industry by creative workers protesting the replacement of human creativity with artificial intelligence (AI). After two days of airing, with 55 million views, Apple issued an official apology. This event is noteworthy because in some cases, negative reactions can lead to a decline in public trust and brand reputation, but on the other hand, controversy can also increase awareness and interest in a product.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This journal uses content analysis to understand the message conveyed through the advertisement and evaluate the public response on social media and in news articles. Through this case study, the contribution lies in understanding crisis management strategies in the relationship between public relations, advertising, and social media, and its implications for future ethical and responsible communication strategies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In the digital era, the roles of Public Relations (PR) and advertising have undergone significant transformation, especially with the rise of social media as a primary platform for disseminating messages. The controversy surrounding Apple's iPad Pro advertisement serves as a compelling example of how PR and advertising interact in the dynamic digital context.

### *The Role of Advertising in the Digital Era*

One of the key strengths of digital advertising is its ability to target specific audiences based on demographics, interests, online behavior, and other data. This allows advertising to be more relevant to particular audiences, enhancing campaign effectiveness and return on investment (ROI). Digital advertising enables advertisers to track performance in real-time through various metrics such as click-through rate (CTR), conversion rate, and impressions, providing deeper insights into advertising effectiveness and allowing adjustments to strategies based on the data obtained. Digital advertising opens up opportunities for greater creativity and interactivity. For example, video ads, interactive ads, or augmented reality (AR) experiences that can provide consumers with more immersive experiences, increasing engagement and brand awareness. According to Kotler (2017), one of the primary roles of advertising in the digital era is its ability to expand reach through a more personalized approach. Kotler explains that digital advertising allows advertisers to target consumers very specifically based on their demographics, interests, and online behavior. This differs greatly from traditional advertising, which was mass-focused and less personal. Kotler highlights that this interaction strengthens the relationship between brands and consumers, creating a more personal and relevant experience because digital ads are

interactive, allowing consumers to engage directly through clicks, comments, or likes. Meanwhile, Aaker (2017) notes that traditional advertising often struggles to measure its impact directly, while digital advertising offers greater transparency in terms of budget and outcomes. Advertisers can optimize their campaigns by adjusting ad messages and improving cost-efficiency based on data. This is further supported by Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick (2019), who explain that digital advertising leverages big data and algorithms to identify target audiences. Algorithms ensure that ads are shown to those most likely to be interested in specific products or services. Chaffey emphasizes that data-driven digital advertising not only increases effectiveness but also provides a more relevant experience for users. These algorithms use behavioral data, such as search history, social media activity, and consumer preferences, to display ads tailored to individual needs. Qualman (2013), in his book explains that advertising in the digital era also plays a role in driving active consumer participation. Social media has provided a platform for ads to go viral, where advertising content can be shared and discussed by millions in a short time.

### *Ethics in Advertising*

Ethics in advertising is a crucial aspect that companies and advertisers must consider when delivering messages to consumers. Experts argue that advertising is not just about campaign effectiveness but must also meet moral and social standards to avoid consumer exploitation, misinformation, or manipulation. O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2004) suggest that manipulation occurs when advertisers attempt to exploit consumers' emotional needs, fears, or vulnerabilities to encourage them to buy products. This is considered unethical as advertisers use dishonest methods to influence consumer decisions. They also warn of the dangers of

exploiting vulnerable groups, such as children and teenagers, who often lack the critical thinking skills to evaluate advertising messages. Advertisers must be careful not to exploit these groups with messages that promote overconsumption or create unrealistic expectations. Kotler (2016) similarly emphasizes that good advertising should not solely focus on selling products but also commit to not harming consumers or society. Kotler highlights the importance of ensuring that the messages conveyed are honest, transparent, and not misleading. He also notes that companies that prioritize ethical advertising are more likely to gain consumer trust, ultimately strengthening their brand reputation. This principle of social responsibility encourages advertisers to create ads that promote public welfare, not just commercial interests. Kotler's view aligns with Shimp (2013), who explains that one of the core principles of advertising ethics is truthfulness. Shimp argues that advertising must not make false or misleading claims about products or services, especially when promoting their benefits, which are often exaggerated or deceptive. Shimp also cautions that deceptive advertising not only violates ethical standards but can also result in legal consequences and damage a company's reputation.

### ***PR as Content Manager and Digital Media Relations***

Grunig (1992) explains that the digital era has transformed the way PR operates, especially in managing online reputation. Grunig stresses the importance of two-way interaction between organizations and the public in modern PR. In the digital era, PR serves as a facilitator of dialogue between companies and the public, where social media and other digital platforms enable direct, rapid, and transparent communication. In this regard, PR is responsible for real-time reputation management, including managing crises that arise from public opinion or feedback on social

media. In her book, Karen Freberg (2019) explains that PR today must be capable of producing content tailored to digital platforms and highlights the importance of authentic digital storytelling to enhance audience engagement and loyalty. However, Freberg also believes that traditional media relations remain important but have expanded to include relationships with influencers, bloggers, and digital journalists. PR professionals must work with various media types to spread consistent brand messages across different platforms. According to Kotler (2017), PR in the digital era focuses on community building and engagement with the public through digital platforms. Kotler argues that the digital age offers PR the opportunity to engage with consumers, build more personal relationships, and create loyal communities through interactive and participatory communication, including managing two-way communication and creating spaces for consumers to speak, give feedback, and participate in brand narratives. As PR professionals proactively monitor conversations in the digital world using analytics tools to detect potential crises, they are also expected to respond quickly and transparently to emerging issues, according to Coombs (2015) PR in the digital era has become more strategic in maintaining brand image, building relationships with audiences, and addressing developments in the online world in real-time.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This is a case study approach with content analysis as the primary method to analyze both the content of the controversial iPad Pro advertisement and the subsequent public response on social media and in news articles. As Klaus Krippendorff (2018) said content analysis enables researchers to quantitatively and qualitatively evaluate media content by coding and categorizing data. The systematic

nature of content analysis allows for an objective and replicable investigation into communication messages. This research focuses on two key elements: The advertisement itself, examining the imagery, symbolism, and messaging strategies used in Apple's "Crush!" ad, and the public response through social media platforms (e.g., X, Instagram, Facebook) and traditional media sources (e.g., news articles, opinions). The comments, shares, and discussions generated by the advertisement were analyzed to understand the spectrum of reactions as according to Robert Philip Weber (1990), basic content analysis is to categorized public responses by sentiment (positive, negative, neutral) and key themes, such as critiques of Apple's ethical stance, reactions from the artistic community, or general public outrage. Data is collected from primary sources such as Apple's advertisement, social media posts, official statements from Apple on the public apologies, and secondary sources such as News articles, editorials' opinions, and interviews from digital platforms covering the controversy.

## **RESULTS**

Apple is known as an innovative brand that often incorporates the concept of "replacing the old with the new" in its marketing campaigns.

The iPad Pro advertisement, shared by Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, on the social media platform X (@tim\_cook) on Tuesday, May 7, 2024, became controversial after it featured a scene where pieces of arts was destroyed. This scene emphasized the capabilities of the iPad Pro as a new creative tool "replacing" the role of other instruments in the arts. The visuals used were futuristic, dominated by colors reflecting modern technology and minimalism. The short video depicted the destruction of artistic works, such as sculptures, musical instruments, books, recording devices, typewriters, and gaming machines, all to introduce the new iPad Pro. The ad employs a narrative structure that positions the iPad Pro as the protagonist overcoming the limitations of traditional tools. Although the destruction of art is controversial, it is presented as part of a new and superior creative process. The advertisement reflects a dominant technological ideology, where technological advancement is perceived as both inevitable and positive. Nevertheless, this perspective has sparked debates about the implications of replacing traditional tools and art forms with new technology, particularly concerning creativity and cultural value.





**Picture 1:** Apple iPad Pro Controversy Ad “Crush!”

**Source:** the internet

Here are the messages dan technology ideology that addressed by Apple though the iPad Pro ad (as seen above); the ad implicitly conveys the message that technology is not just a tool, but an agent of change that redefine creativity. There is also a message that Apple technology represents the "future" and is superior to traditional methods and Apple employs a technology ideology to emphasize that their

innovations bring about necessary and desired changes.

The ad sparked controversy and the debates could be seen through social media responses on the iPad Pro "Crush!" ad based on hashtags and user interaction data during the period of May 2024:

**Table 1.** Media Social Responds on iPad Pro Ad

Platform	Hashtags Used	Tone
Twitter (X)	#CrushAd, #iPadPro2024	Mixed (mostly negative)
Instagram	#AppleFail, #iPadProAd	Negative
YouTube	#iPadCrush	Negative
Reddit	#AdFails, #iPadControversy	Mixed

**Source:** the internet

Most users felt the ad's message about creativity was lost due to the visual destruction of artistic symbols, which seemed contrary to Apple's

usual celebration of creativity. Notable influencers and creatives took to X to express their disapproval. Apple eventually issued an apology and pulled the ad from future broadcast

plans, acknowledging that it "missed the mark" with this campaign. Below are ten global influencers who publicly voiced their objections to the controversial 2024 iPad Pro "Crush!" advertisement:

1. MKBHD (Marques Brownlee), a tech reviewer with millions of followers who tweeted that while Apple's tech is groundbreaking, the ad's destruction of creative tools was a "tone-deaf move for a brand that prides itself on supporting creativity."
2. Justine Ezarik (iJustine), a popular tech influencer and long-time Apple supporter, who commented that while she loves Apple products, this ad "felt like a slap in the face to artists and creatives."
3. Casey Neistat, a filmmaker and vlogger, who posted on Instagram that the ad "sends the wrong message about creativity and innovation, especially in today's artistic community."
4. Sara Dietschy, a tech creator known for reviewing creative tech, voiced her discontent on X saying, "It's ironic how they're destroying tools creators use to make art, and this is supposed to inspire us?"
5. Austin Evans, another tech YouTuber, who stated on his YouTube channel that "Apple needs to rethink its messaging, especially when many creatives are already feeling displaced by tech innovations like AI."
6. Rene Ritchie, an Apple analyst, who expressed on X that "the symbolism is off," and the destruction in the ad seemed "in poor taste for a brand built on helping creators."
7. Jonathan Morrison, a tech reviewer, who shared his thoughts on YouTube, saying, "Destroying these tools of

creativity feels disrespectful, especially given the timing with the AI debates."

8. TLD (Tech Lead Dom), another influencer in the tech space who criticized the ad on Instagram for being "out of touch with what creators truly value."
9. Unbox Therapy (Lewis Hilsenteger), he posted a video stating, "I get the concept of power and destruction, but this was definitely a misfire, especially for artists who rely on these tools."
10. Joanna Stern (Wall Street Journal), a tech columnist and reviewer, who mentioned on X that "Apple missed a huge opportunity to uplift creators instead of tearing down the very symbols of their work."

These influencers collectively helped shape the negative discourse surrounding the ad, reflecting the creative community's dissatisfaction with Apple's messaging. Not only influencers, Hollywood star such Hugh Grant was one of the first who share his feeling on the ad, stating "the destruction of human experience. Courtesy of Silicon Valley".

This journal also analyzed a total of 35 global news articles about the controversial iPad Pro advertisement from period of May 2024, most of the news highlights ethical criticism regarding the destruction of artwork in the advertisement, with the art community being one of the most vocal groups. However, audience reactions are mixed. For some consumers, Apple is still viewed as a bold and creative innovator. However, for others, the ad creates the impression that Apple does not value traditional art, which lead to perceptions of arrogance or insensitivity to cultural values. Even competitors like Samsung took the opportunity to create a counter-ad that explicitly compared Samsung's pro-art stance. In response, Apple quickly addressed the controversy by issuing an apology and clarifying that they did not intend to disrespect

art. Although the immediate impact on sales has not been significant, the ad has become a reminder on the long-term effects on the brand's reputation.

## DISCUSSION

Image of a brand refers to consumers' perceptions of a brand, formed through various interactions with the product, marketing communications, and overall experiences with the company. Brand image encompasses specific associations tied to the brand, such as quality, innovation, trust, and social values. Keller (2012) defines brand image as the interpretation given by consumers to a brand based on all the information they receive, including both rational associations (function, product benefits) and emotional associations (feelings, memories). Kotler (2016) further explains that brand image is the perception held by consumers about a brand, shaped by their experiences, impressions, and expectations regarding the products or services offered by the company. Advertisements are an essential marketing tool in shaping and strengthening brand image as they contain signs and meanings in which a company can communicate its intended messages to the audience, from introducing products to building a consistent narrative around the brand. Successful advertisements not only enhance brand awareness but also reinforce the positive image desired by the company.

Digital media such as social media, enables advertisements to spread quickly and widely through sharing, likes, comments, and retweets. When an advertisement or content goes viral, its reach can transcend traditional boundaries, quickly reaching a global audience. The controversial iPad Pro ad spread rapidly on social media, sparking widespread discussion and debate. The main criticism stemmed from the perceived disregard for the value of art and cultural heritage, highlighting a conflict

between technological innovation and the preservation of art. In 2017, Pepsi released an advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner, aiming to associate the product with social protest movements, the Black Live Matter. The ad showed Jenner handing a can of Pepsi to a police officer, seemingly as a symbol of peace during a protest. The ad was heavily criticized for trivializing serious social movements for commercial gain. Similar to Apple's case, Pepsi faced backlash on social media, with critics accusing the company of being insensitive to important social issues. And in 2018, Dolce & Gabbana released a series of ads in China featuring a Chinese model struggling to eat Italian food with chopsticks. The ad was deemed racist and highly insensitive to Chinese culture, sparking outrage, particularly on Chinese social media. Despite the company's apology, the long-term impact on Dolce & Gabbana's reputation in China was significant, with many celebrities and consumers boycotting the brand.

Both Apple and Pepsi ads used symbolic representations that were seen as diminishing values cherished by specific segments of society. In both cases, the companies issued rapid responses to manage the crisis, with Pepsi pulling the ad and Apple issuing clarifications and an apology. While Dolce & Gabbana faced severe long-term reputational harm due to their failure to effectively address the crisis. This highlights the importance of proper PR response and cultural awareness when dealing with global markets. Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model (1988) explains how large corporations use media to promote their interests, often without considering the social or cultural impact. Thus, Berthon, Pitt, and Watson (1996) argue that controversial advertising can sometimes benefit a brand by increasing exposure and sparking public discussion if handled correctly. In Apple's case, despite of the criticism, the long-term impact on sales or brand image not yet



determine due to Apple's established reputation and a highly loyal customer base.

Moreover, Harris and Attour (2003) suggests that companies failing to manage public perception on social media can experience long-term damage to their reputation. This study underscores the importance of a quick and appropriate response to crises in the social media age, particularly in a digital era whereas public reaction spreads rapidly. Apple's response in this case aligns with recommended crisis management principles, as they swiftly addressed the controversy, reducing its intensity by issuing clarifications and an apology.

## CONCLUSION

In a competitive market, brand image helps a brand stand out among competitors, and effective advertising is beneficial in building and maintaining a positive brand image, fostering trust and emotional attachment from consumers. A well-maintained brand image through appropriate advertising will have a long-term impact on the brand's position in the market and its interactions with the audience. Controversial advertisements can have dual impacts on brand image, as the ads can attract significant attention and generate buzz around the brand, which potentially increasing visibility and brand awareness. On the contrary, if the controversy is seen as harmful or offensive to the audience, it can damage the brand image and create negative sentiment toward the brand. In the case of Apple's iPad Pro advertisement, where the destruction of art objects is part of the narrative, audience reactions are mixed. For some consumers, Apple is still viewed as a bold and creative innovator. However, for others, the ad creates the impression that Apple does not value traditional art, which can lead to perceptions of arrogance or insensitivity to cultural values. Consumers who feel offended or disagree with

the message in the ad tend to respond more emotionally, whether through criticism on social media, boycotting the product, or decreasing loyalty to the brand. In the digital age, such reactions can quickly spread and shape broader public perceptions, as social media plays a crucial role in facilitating consumer reactions to advertisements. In the case of the iPad Pro ad, platforms like X and Instagram became key venues for discussion and debate. Negative feedback on social media can accelerate the detrimental impact on brand image if not properly managed by the PR team. While most criticism can harm brand image, there are also consumers who respond positively or neutrally, especially if they view the ad as an artistic expression or bold innovation. This indicates that the impact of controversial ads heavily depends on audience segmentation and how the message is interpreted.

To mitigate the negative impacts of controversial ads, companies must respond quickly to public reactions. This could involve official statements, explanations regarding the intent behind the ad, or even revisions or retractions if deemed necessary. PR should work to build a positive narrative that can counteract negative sentiment. In the context of the iPad Pro ad, Apple could highlight how the iPad Pro is used by artists and creators to produce extraordinary works of art, aiming to redirect focus back to the product's benefits rather than the controversial elements of the advertisement. Engaging with communities and influential figures who can support the brand's message can also help mitigate controversy. For instance, Apple could collaborate with artists who use the iPad Pro to reinforce the perception that the product is a powerful creative tool, not just a piece of technology.

This study demonstrates that in a highly connected digital era, the impact of advertisements on brand image can be widespread and intense. Therefore, advertisers

need to be more careful and ethical in designing their advertising messages, considering the potential for diverse audience reactions.

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